AFTER THE BATTLE

THE BATTLE FOR NEW GEORGIA
CAPTURE OF KURT MEYER
SIWA OASIS

9 770306 154073 98

Number 98

NUMBER 98

Edited by Winston G. Ramsey

European Editor: Karel Margry

Published by Battle of Britain Prints International Ltd.,
Church House, Church Street,
London E15 3JA, England

Telephone: 0181-534 8833
Fax: 0181-555 7567
E-mail: afterthebattle@mcmail.com

Printed in Great Britain by
Neil Moore Associates,
23-25 Wilton Way, London E8 3EE

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After the Battle is published quarterly on the 15th of February, May, August and November.

United Kingdom Newsagent Distribution:
Seymour Press Ltd., Windsor House, 1270 London Road, Norbury, London SW16 4DH.
Telephone: 0181-679 1899

United States Distribution and Subscriptions:
RZM Imports, PO Box 995, Southbury, CT, 06488
Telephone: 1-203-264-0774

Canadian Distribution and Subscriptions:
Vanwell Publishing Ltd., 1 Northrup Crescent, St. Catharines, Ontario L2M 6P5.
Telephone: (905) 937 3100 Fax: (905) 937 1760

Australian Subscriptions and Back Issues:
Technical Book and Magazine Company, Pty, Ltd., 289-299 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000.
Telephone: 663 3951

New Zealand Distribution:
South Pacific Books (Imports) Ltd., 6 King Street, Grey Lynn, Auckland 2. Telephone: 762-142

Italian Distribution:
Tuttostoria, Casella Postale 395, 1-43100 Parma.
Telephone: 0521 290 387, Telex 532274 EDIALB I

Dutch Language Edition:
Quo Vadis, Postbus 3121, 3760 DC Soest.
Telephone: 035 6018641

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Front Cover: M3 Stuart light tank of the 11th Marine Defense Battalion on Arundel Island knocked out by Japanese 37mm guns on September 18, 1943. Photographed by Professor Ronnie Day in 1995.

Centre Pages: Where ten people crashed to their deaths in 1944. A splash of red in a spectacular landscape covers the plaque erected high in the mountains of south-eastern France to the occupants of Avro York MW126. (Jean Paul Pallud)

Back Cover: The Egyptian Sand Sea — beautiful yet treacherous — had to be crossed on David List's journey to Siwa Oasis. *Inset:* Wartime Shell petrol tin filled with sand still in use as a way marker. (David List)

Acknowledgements: Jean Paul Pallud is indebted to Louis Warolus and Jean Louis Roba, who gave him much valuable help in his research into the capture of Kurt Meyer, and to Peter Taghon.

Photo Credits: IWM — Imperial War Museum, London.

Our author, Professor Ronnie Day, is the chair of the history department at the East Tennessee State University and has studied all the published works on the war in the South Pacific. For a number of years, he has worked on editing the diary of Mack Morriss, the wartime correspondent for *Yank, The Army Weekly*. 'The moment I saw the diary, 'says Ronnie,' I knew it was a very key piece of World War history, and I visited the South Pacific three times, travelling 65,000 miles in Morriss's footsteps, partially funded by a grant from the Research Development Committee of the University.' This account of the Battle for New Georgia came about as a result. *South Pacific Diary* by Mack Morriss, edited by Ronnie Day, is published by the University Press of Kentucky. The picture shows Professor Ronnie with Morriss's widow, Helen.

The New Georgia group lies approximately in the middle of the Solomon Island chain. Eleven moderately-sized islands and numerous islets make up the group that extends over a north-west south-east axis for a distance of about 130 miles. The islands are volcanic in origin and symmetrical cones rising to several thousand feet and covered with dense tropical forest dominate the interiors of the bigger islands. Barrier reefs studded with islands have created large lagoons that protect much of the coasts, especially those of the largest island of New Georgia. Situated 500 miles south of the Equator, rainfall is heavy and in 1941, the last year the District Officer at Gizo was able to make his report, totalled 133 inches. The battle for New Georgia lasted from July to October 1943. The Allied objective was the Japanese airfield at Munda Point on New Georgia proper (in this regard, New Georgia [2] was the second rung up the Solomons ladder to Rabaul, Guadalcanal [1] being the first and Bougainville [3] the third). The usual air and naval preparation began in January 1943 while the battle for Guadalcanal was still in progress. Because of enemy pressure on the coast-watcher on New Georgia, Marine Raiders seized Segi and Viru Harbor in the eastern parts in mid-June. (American coast-watchers were active on many of the Japanese-occupied islands in the Pacific, equipped with radios, to maintain covert intelligence gathering on enemy movements and shipping.) Then, on June 30, the main ground force was committed, landing at Rendova because Munda Bar (reef) prevented any direct assault on the airfield from the sea.

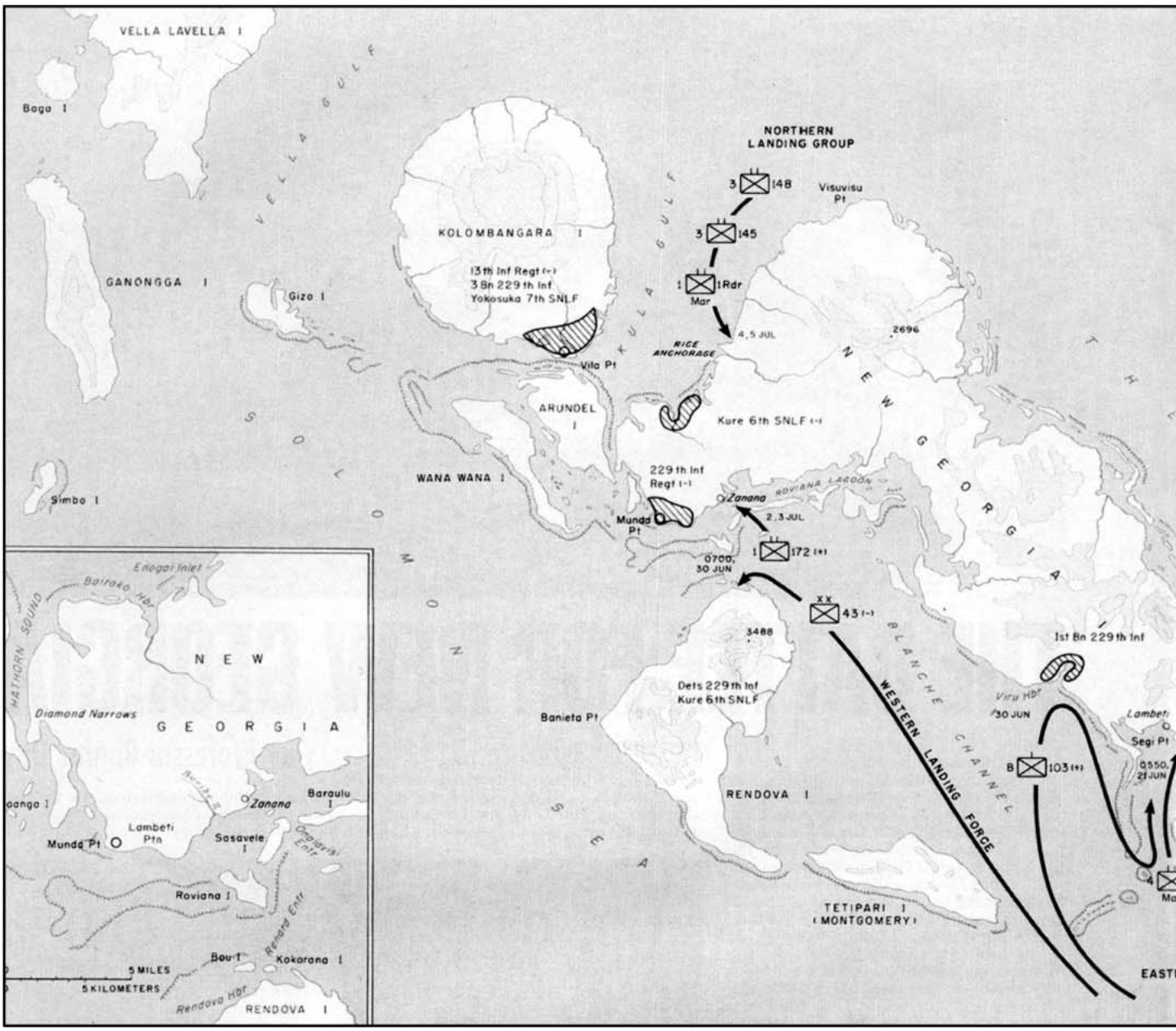
THE BATTLE FOR NEW GEORGIA

By Professor Ronnie Day

On the eve of the war, the New Georgia group of the Solomon Islands was sparsely inhabited by dark-skinned Melanesian people who lived in small villages along the coasts, primarily in the great lagoons. Widespread head-hunting and murderous retaliatory raids (both finally suppressed by the British Protectorate Government in the early 20th century) along with two severe dysentery epidemics had resulted in depopulation. Government officials estimated that the total numbers had declined from roughly 15,000 before 1914 to less than 8,000 by 1941. The foreign population was never large and probably numbered less than 100 in 1941. The administrative seat was at Gizo where the District Officer, responsible to the Resident Commissioner at Tulagi, collected customs duties and maintained order with an Armed Constabulary of eight men from Malaita and Choiseul and a wooden jail enclosed by barbed wire. The rest of the foreign population was made up of merchants (mainly at Gizo and Simbo); Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist missionaries (the former at Munda and the latter at Batuna) and a scattering of coconut planters on Vella Lavella, Kolombangara, New Georgia and Rendova.

New Georgia's military significance centered on Munda where the old head-hunter Ingava once had his canoe house and where the Reverend John Goldie had founded the Methodist mission in 1902. The plain around Kokenggolo Hill where Goldie built his residence and his school was suitable for the construction of a large air base. In mid-November 1942, the Japanese landed in force at Munda and began construction of an airfield in Goldie's coconut plantation, wiring the tops of the palms and then cutting the trunks so that the operation was concealed for a time under the camouflage canopy of the palm fronds. When the airfield was finished on December 15, the Japanese crossed to the Levers plantation at Vila-Stanmore on Kolombangara and began a second air strip although the soil there proved to be unsuitable and the strip was never much used. The base at Munda, however, was enough to seal New Georgia's fate. As Admiral William F. Halsey, the commander of the US South Pacific Theater, put it after the war, 'Munda was blocking our path to Bougainville, Bougainville was blocking our path to Rabaul, and Rabaul was the keystone of the whole Japanese structure in the southern Pacific'.

The airfield at Munda had been built by the Japanese after they captured New Georgia in November 1942. They chose a site on the plain between Kokenggolo Hill and the sea where the Methodist missionary, the Reverend John Goldie, had established his residence, school and hospital in 1902, pictured *(top)* in 1936. (Solomon Islands National Museum) *Above*: **Today, all that remains of the mission are these crumbling foundations in the undergrowth. The Reverend Goldie lost his house, all his personal belongings, and his extensive 3,000-volume library, so he put in a post-war claim for £50,000 compensation to the British government — the island being part of the British protectorate in the Solomon Islands since 1893, becoming independent in 1978. The mission, also the home of the Chairman of the District, has since been rebuilt on a new site north-west of the airfield.**



THE OPENING ROUND

Following the Japanese evacuation of Guadalcanal in early February 1943, fighting on the ground in the Solomons came to a halt. But there was no lull in the skies. Allied strategy as the United States Air Force intelligence publication, *Impact*, summed it up, was 'to neutralize enemy air power, repeatedly attacking airfields, which in turn may be attacked by the Navy, occupied by our troops and converted to Allied use'. Along with Japanese airfields in the Shortlands and Bougainville, Munda became a target for the growing Allied airpower based at Guadalcanal and the Russells. Even before the airfield itself was discovered in early December 1942, American heavy bombers levelled the area around Munda and, once the aerial photographs showed that an airfield was being constructed under the tops of the coconut palms, the air attacks increased in intensity. Aircraft of every type from the Army and Marines struck Munda all flying together under Air Command, Solomons, better known as COMAIRSOLS. The Japanese called Kokenggolo Hill *Bakudan* (Bomb Hill) and wrote after the war that the 'violent daily air attacks . . . transformed the lay of the land'. While the Japanese were able to keep the field operational despite the bombing and the periodic naval bombardments that began on the night of January 4/5 and continued through May 1943, they were not able to use Munda for anything more than a staging base.

The Japanese, in fact, found themselves in a critical situation in what they called the South-east Area — New Guinea, the Bismarcks, and the Solomons — as a result of their defeats in New Guinea and on Guadalcanal. Their losses in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea (March 1-4) while trying to reinforce Lae in New Guinea and in Yamamoto's 'I' operation (early April) while trying to achieve some parity in the air, made their situation worse. This was especially true in regard to New Georgia which after the defeat at Guadalcanal was very likely to be the next Allied objective. But, the army and navy which operated independently disagreed on strategy regarding the group. The army, more concerned with New Guinea, wanted to shorten supply lines and set the defensive line on Bougainville whereas the navy, fearing for its great base at Rabaul, wanted to make New Georgia the first line of defence. In the end, after a formal agreement committed the navy to defend New Georgia and the army Bougainville, the army relented further and agreed to send troops to New Georgia to support the navy. New Georgia, in fact, would be defended by units that had either fought at Guadalcanal or had been on their way there when Imperial Headquarters gave up the attempt to retake the island.

In February, Rear Admiral Minoru Ota's 8th Combined Special Naval Landing Force (the Kure 6th SNLF, the Yokosuka 7th SNLF and elements of the Maizuru 4th SNLF) which had been destined for Guadalcanal took over the defence of New Georgia from the Base Force. The first army units sent in came from the 38th Division and included all three battalions of the 229th Infantry, at least one battalion of the 230th Infantry and some elements of the 228th Infantry. Along with the ground troops, elements of the 10th Regiment Independent Mountain Artillery and the 15th Field Defence Anti-aircraft Artillery Unit and various support units were in place by May. The 38th Division had fought at Guadalcanal, but it is doubtful that there were many actual combat veterans going into the lines at New Georgia. American XIV Corps intelligence gathered from Japanese prisoners indicated that in the case of the 229th, of which one battalion had fought at Guadalcanal, only about a company of combat veterans

remained, the rest were replacements. As its command organisation in New Georgia, 8th Area Army at Rabaul created the Southeast Detachment Headquarters under the command of Major General Noboru Sasaki, Chief of Infantry of the 38th Division, who moved to Kolombangara on May 31 and set up his headquarters.

OPERATION 'TOENAILS'

While the possibility of bypassing New Georgia and landing in southern Bougainville had been discussed among Allied commanders, Halsey seems to have been convinced from the start that Munda would have to be taken. His amphibious commander, Vice-Admiral Richmond K. Turner, had begun stockpiling supplies on Guadalcanal while construction units rushed to complete two new bomber bases east of Henderson Field along with fuel storage tanks and other facilities and two new airfields in the Russells. 'Every time I pass a Seabee bulldozer,' Halsey reportedly said, 'I want to stop and kiss it.' All the while, Allied troop strength continued to grow. The 25th Infantry Division, veteran of the January offensive on Guadalcanal, was still on the island undergoing training; the 43rd Infantry Division which was earmarked for the New Georgia invasion, arrived in February (less the 172nd Infantry which came later); and the 37th Division (less the 129th Infantry) arrived in April. Neither a destructive tropical storm on May 9 that washed out bridges and destroyed floating docks, nor heavy Japanese air raids which culminated in a 120-plane raid on June 18, did much to impede the effort.

Meanwhile, the Allies had worked out the plans for the coming offensive. On April 26, General Douglas MacArthur, Allied commander in the Southwest Pacific theater, issued Elkton III, the final version of a plan that had evolved over the past three months. Code-named 'Cartwheel', it provided for a two-pronged offensive by stages against the Japanese base at Rabaul, one up the eastern coast of New Guinea, the other up the Solomons chain. Problems of command brought on by the fact that New Georgia was in MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Theater had been resolved. MacArthur was to be in overall command, but Halsey, commander of the South Pacific Theater, was to be in operational command in the Solomons area where the first stage of 'Cartwheel' called for the conquest of New Georgia.

Working from solid intelligence gathered during several reconnaissance missions into the New Georgia area, Halsey's planners came up with 'Toenails', as the operational plan for New Georgia was called, by early June. Modifications were made later as the situation warranted but, in general, the basic plan remained the same. Since the great reef known as the Munda Bar prohibited a direct assault on Munda, 'Toenails' called for five separate landings to be made on D-Day which was ultimately set for June 30. Small forces would occupy Wickham Anchorage, Segi Point, and Viru Harbor to protect the line of communication between Rendova and Guadalcanal and to commence a fighter base at Segi. The main body would land at Rendova with a detachment seizing Honiavasa Passage, the entrance into Roviana Lagoon. With Rendova secured, additional troops and supplies would be landed July 1-4 and the artillery emplaced on Rendova and the islands in Roviana Lagoon. When these preparations were complete, the assault troops would be ferried from Rendova through Honiavasa Passage and Roviana Lagoon to the New Georgia mainland and, supported by the artillery on the islands, launch the attack on Munda from east of the field. Simultaneously, another force coming from Guadalcanal would land at Rice Harbor in Kula Gulf, move overland to take Enogai and Bairoko Harbor which would choke off the main Japanese supply route from Vila to Munda and, if possible, link up with the forces attacking Munda.

In mid-June, however, a situation developed at Segi Point in eastern New Georgia which caused a major change in Allied plans. In general, the Japanese had concentrated their forces at three points. Two battalions of the 229th Infantry (Colonel Genjiro Hirata) and most of the antiaircraft units were at Munda, most of the 6th Kure SNLF (Commander Saburo Okumura) was at Bairoko, and the 7th Yokosuka SNLF (Commander Koshin Takeda) and one battalion of the 229th was at Kolombangara. Only small mixed detachments guarded the other key points at Wickham Anchorage, Viru Harbor, and Rendova. Until early June, the Japanese had shown little interest in Segi where coastwatcher Donald Kennedy had operated with impunity since July 1942. This changed when Major Masao Hara, commander of the 1st Battalion of the 229th, was ordered to eastern New Georgia with part of his unit to set things straight and to push Kennedy out. Documents captured during a sharp clash between a Japanese patrol and native scouts on June 16 alerted Kennedy to the danger and on the night of June 18/19 he requested reinforcement to hold Segi until the Allied invasion force arrived. At Guadalcanal, Turner wasted no time. By the evening of June 20, two destroyer transports were on their way at high speed to Segi with two companies of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Currin) which landed early the next morning. The following day, destroyers landed two companies of the 103rd Infantry along with a survey party from Acorn 7, an airfield construction unit built around the 47th Naval Construction (Seabee) Battalion. Turner's altered plans called for the infantry and raiders to establish a base at Segi from which they could aid in the attacks on Viru Harbor and Wickham Anchorage while the Seabee officers determined the site for an airfield. For reasons never clearly explained, the Japanese were curiously complacent about the sudden Allied activity at Segi.

June 29, 1943 — the Allied invasion force assembles off Koli Point, Guadalcanal. That afternoon it sailed for Rendova. Unlike most Pacific operations, Operation 'Toenails' — the invasion of New Georgia — went in virtually unopposed. (Signal Corps)

The landing — a symbolic composition typifying the Pacific war. Although not identified by the photographer, Professor Day believes this is the 172nd Infantry, 43rd Division, going ashore on the eastern beach of Rendova Harbor. (US Navy)

THE JAPANESE TAKEN BY SURPRISE

As planned, the Allied invasion force moved toward New Georgia on the stormy night of June 29/30. An American task group of light cruisers, destroyers, and minelayers returning from mining the harbour and bombarding the Japanese advance base in the Shortlands early in the morning of June 30, reported that 'all along the west coast of Vella Lavella, Ganongga, and New Georgia, heavy black rain clouds hung almost at masthead height'. During the first hours of the landing, the weather caused more problems for the invaders than the enemy. Destroyer minesweeper *Zane*, part of the detachment that was to land troops at Honiavasa Passage, ran aground in the darkness during a rain squall, but was pulled free late in the day and towed back to Tulagi. Off Rendova, the advance unit that was to secure the beach, two specially-trained companies of the 172nd Infantry, got lost in the rain and fog and landed at the wrong place. It was still raining at dawn, when Turner's four big transports and two cargo ships screened by eight destroyers, hove to off Renard Entrance and at 0630 began landing the 172nd Regiment of the 43rd Division. The small enemy garrison of less than 200 men of the 229th Infantry and the Kure 6th SNLF was quickly overwhelmed and successive waves of landing craft brought in the 9th Marine Defense Battalion, the 24th Naval Construction Battalion, 103rd Field Artillery Battalion and various headquarters and base units. Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 9 which accompanied the landing force set up a base at Lumbaria Island in Rendova Harbor. By 1600, Turner's transports had unloaded and were underway in Blanche Channel for Guadalcanal. During the next four days, the second, third and fourth echelons, utilising for the first time in the Pacific war the new LST (Landing Ship, Tank), LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry), and LCT (Landing Craft, Tank) brought in the rest of the 43rd Division not committed to the other landings at Segi and Wickham Anchorage.

The Japanese response was uncoordinated and, while inflicting some casualties and damage on the Allies, ineffective. Although warned at midnight on June 29/30 by submarine *RO 103* that Turner's transports were on the way, the commanders at Munda as they wrote later were 'completely baffled' by the landing at Rendova. The SNLF coastal artillery, eight guns ranging from 3-inch to 5.5-inch, had been sited to cover the approach over the Munda Bar. These guns opened fire on the closest screening destroyers, but after scoring one hit were quickly silenced. Thereafter, the Japanese at Munda could only watch as seven miles away the Allies transformed Rendova into a military base. On July 2, 155mm guns on Rendova took the airfield under fire and subjected it to a constant bombardment.

Left: ***USS Zane*** **(DMS 14), which ran aground at Honiavasa Passage in the early morning of June 30, was commissioned in 1921 as a Clemson-class destroyer. She was converted to a high-speed minesweeper in 1940 and was a veteran of Pearl Harbor and Guadalcanal. Following the grounding at Honiavasa, she was repaired at Mare Island and served in the later campaigns in the Marshalls and Marianas. (Photo supplied via Joseph E. Gunterman, a member of the *Zane's* crew in WWII.)**

The *Zane* was struck from the Navy list in 1946 and scrapped in 1947, but she lived on as the model for one of the most famous novels to come out of the war: Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*. *Right*: **It appears now that a material part of her has survived in this anchor, pictured here by Professor Day at Sasavele Village, which Dave and Mariana Cook, operators of Solomon Sea Divers at Munda, found on the reef at Honiavasa Passage.**

LSTs following the same route as the assault troops the day before, pass through Renard Entrance to Rendova Lagoon on July 1, 1943. Kokorana Island (local spelling Kukurana) is to the left, Bau Island (local spelling Pau) is to the right. Rendova Mountain, obscured by rain and clouds, is in the background. East landing beach is to the port side of the leading LST, while the west landing beach is blocked from view by Pangopango Island off the starboard bow of the leading LST. (US Navy)

What little success the Japanese enjoyed against the invasion force was in the air. But, here again they had miscalculated. Misled by the lack of radio intelligence in the last days of June, they had pulled back their aircraft from the advanced bases in Bougainville. As a result, they were not able to put any planes over Rendova until roughly 1100, over four hours after Turning had started unloading, and none of these got through fighter cover to the transports. The second and last attack of the day, arriving after Turner had finished unloading and was underway in Blanche Channel, did succeed in torpedoing the flagship *McCawley* which was left sinking. On July 2 and again on July 4, the Japanese struck Rendova with heavy raids. The first of these caught the men on the beaches by surprise and without fighter cover since the Allied bases were shut in by weather and almost 200 men were either killed or wounded and a considerable amount of supplies destroyed. The Independence Day raid, however, came in too low and lost many of its planes to anti-aircraft fire while inflicting only moderate damage to some LCIs.

Japanese naval forces closest at hand in the Shortlands at the time of the invasion consisted of one light cruiser, *Yubari*, and eight or nine destroyers. Two attempts were made against the Rendova beach-head. Both were complete failures. The first, a destroyer force, sailed from the Shortlands on the night of June 30, but early next morning ran into a rain squall in Blanche Channel and retired without making contact with the Allied force. The second attempt was made early on the morning of July 3 when *Yubari* and nine destroyers bombarded Rendova, but all of the shells landed in the jungle and caused no damage. That afternoon, three light cruisers and five destroyers under the command of Rear Admiral Walker L. Ainsworth sailed from Tulagi and took up a cruising position just west of Rendova a couple of hours before midnight. But the Japanese failed to put in an appearance and the American force returned to Tulagi.

Renard Entrance and Rendova Harbor, July 25, 1995. The settlement on what was once the eastern landing beach is now the married quarters for workers of the Malaita Labour Line which works the coconut plantation.

A tractor-drawn scraper of the 47th Naval Construction Battalion of Acorn 7 ripping out the airstrip at Segi from Harold Markham's coconut plantation. Some of the mature palms that made his operation profitable can be seen still standing in the background. Markham, along with other small, independent planters, was ruined by the war since the British government declined to make any compensation for war losses. He died in Sydney in 1954. (Signal Corps)

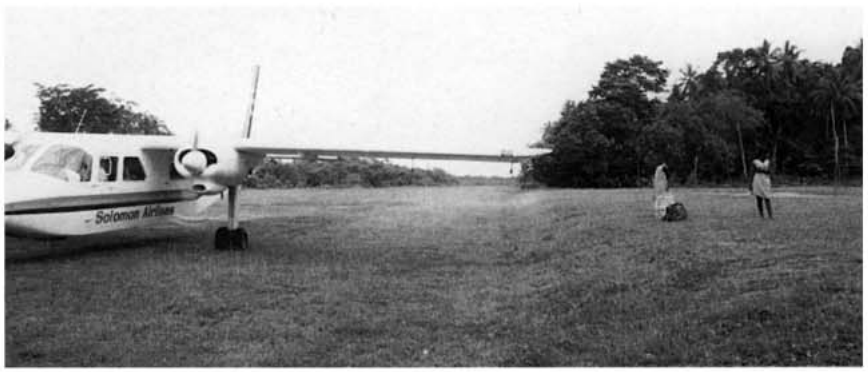
Meanwhile, the secondary landings took place as planned. As at Rendova, the weather caused problems at Wickham Anchorage. The landing force which included the 2nd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, a detachment of the 4th Marine Raider Battalion, elements of the 20th Seabees, a battery of the 70th Coast Artillery and a battery of the 152nd Field Artillery, began landing at Oloana Bay, Vangunu about 0335 on June 30. It was raining heavily and high winds had whipped up the sea. Consequently, the landing craft scattered and it was not until 0700 that the commander could regroup his force and march on the Japanese garrison a few miles east at Kaeruku. Although taken by surprise and badly outnumbered, the platoon of the 229th Infantry and company of the 6th SNLF put up a fight that lasted three hours and cost the attackers 22 dead and 43 wounded. Over 100 of the defenders were killed before the survivors retreated into the bush. Early the next morning, three Japanese barges bringing in supplies and unaware that Americans now occupied the site, tried to land and were wiped out almost to a man. Within a few days, the Vangunu-Wickham Anchorage-Gatukai region had been cleared of Japanese forces.

Viru Harbor proved a harder nut to crack and the Allies suffered their only setback there in the landings on June 30. The plan was for the marine raiders at Segi Point to go first by rubber boat and then through the jungle to attack Viru Harbor from the land side in conjunction with the arrival of the occupying force by sea. To carry out their part of the plan, the raiders left Segi at nightfall on June 27. But rain-swollen rivers and Japanese resistance delayed their arrival for a day and when the occupation force arrived at dawn on June 30 it was met by fire from a Japanese 3-inch gun. As a result, the Viru Harbor force turned back and landed at Segi Point. Next morning, however, the action was worthy of a Hollywood script-writer. The raiders attacked the main body of Hara's troops dug in on the west shore of the harbour; American dive bombers were called in and hit the Japanese positions at about 0900; while the bombing was still in progress the LSTs of the second echelon of the occupying force, unaware that the Japanese were still holding the area, sailed blithely into the harbour. In a fierce fire-fight that lasted through the morning and into mid-afternoon, the raiders drove Hara's men from their positions at a cost of two dozen marine dead and wounded. Almost 50 Japanese were killed and the rest, some 170 men, retreated into the bush and ultimately made their way to Munda in time to take part in the final defence of the field. By late afternoon, the LSTs were unloading.

As it turned out, only Segi Point, where Harold Markham had developed a plantation that visitors described as a Garden of Eden, proved of much value to the Allies in the coming campaign. Before the initial landing, an artillery officer in the American reconnaissance mission had reported that he had 'found very good gun positions in Mr Markham's garden' (which contained rare tropical fruits imported from all over the world) and another, Captain Robert Ryan, a California engineer serving with the 47th Seabees, began marking out with his eye the airfield he visualised in Markham's profitable coconut plantation. On June 30, an LST landed Acorn 7 at 1010 in the morning and by that afternoon the bulldozers had begun ripping the airstrip from Markham's 4,000 mature coconut palms. Eleven days later, the first fighters landed at Segi Field.

The final two landings of the 'Toenails' operation took place during the first week of July, one at Zanana east of Munda and the other at Rice Harbor north of Munda on Kula Gulf. Major General John W. Hester who wore the two caps of commander of the 43rd Division and commander of the New Georgia Occupation Force has been criticised, in particular by naval historian Samuel Eliot Morison, for his decision to land at Zanana which was five miles from the objective when another suitable beach, Laiana, three miles to the west, would have put the assault troops so much closer. Responding later to Morison's criticism, Turner, who had approved Hester's decision, noted that patrols had reported Laiana to be heavily defended and that prevailing opinion at that stage of the war had held that, if possible, landings should be avoided in the face of organised resistance. At any rate, the landing was made at Zanana beginning July 3 when the first elements of the 172nd Regiment established the beach-head and continued until July 6 when all of the 172nd and the 169th had been ferried across from Rendova along with the 1st Commando, Fiji Guerrillas, who were to serve as scouts. At the same time, over five battalions of artillery, 105mms and 155mms, were emplaced on the barrier islands to support the attack. The plan was for the infantry to advance some 2½ to three miles to the Barike River and from there launch the attack on Munda.

The landing at Rice Harbor, 15 miles north of Munda, took place early in the morning of July 5. Eleven destroyers with three more in a screening group brought in the mixed force of the 3rd Battalions of the 145th and 148th Infantry, 37th Division, and the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, under the command of Colonel Harry Liversedge, commanding officer of the 1st Marine Raider Regiment. Ainsworth's cruisers and destroyers led the way to carry out a bombardment of Vila and Bairoko Harbor and a few minutes after midnight, the warships opened fire on Vila and then turned and shifted their fire on Bairoko Harbor. They were retiring from Kula Gulf as the landing force arrived when *Strong* was hit by a torpedo that tore open her hull on both sides and stopped her dead in the water, sinking. Alerted by the naval gun-fire, the Japanese had turned and retired toward the north-west, but not before launching the long-range torpedoes at Ainsworth's squadron. *Strong* sank and *Chevalier* was damaged in a collision with her as the crew was taken off. Through the rest of the night, Higgins boats took the troops ashore at Rice Harbor in a downpour and under fire from two of the Japanese 14cm guns at Enogai. No casualties were suffered in the darkness. But with the approach of dawn, and with all the troops and 90 per cent of the supplies and equipment ashore and the chances of being hit growing, the transports withdrew.



Now Segi Airport. Solomon Islands Domestic Airlines makes regular stops, and tourists en route to the Uipi Island resort in Marova Lagoon land here and complete the last leg of the trip by canoe.

Smoke from a near hit by a Japanese bomb drifts over a 155mm 'Long Tom' of the 9th Marine Defense Battalion on Rendova. Two 155s were slightly damaged in the heavy Japanese air raid on July 2. (US Navy)

A typical Japanese pillbox on one of the ridges that formed the Japanese defensive line east of Munda Field. (Signal Corps)

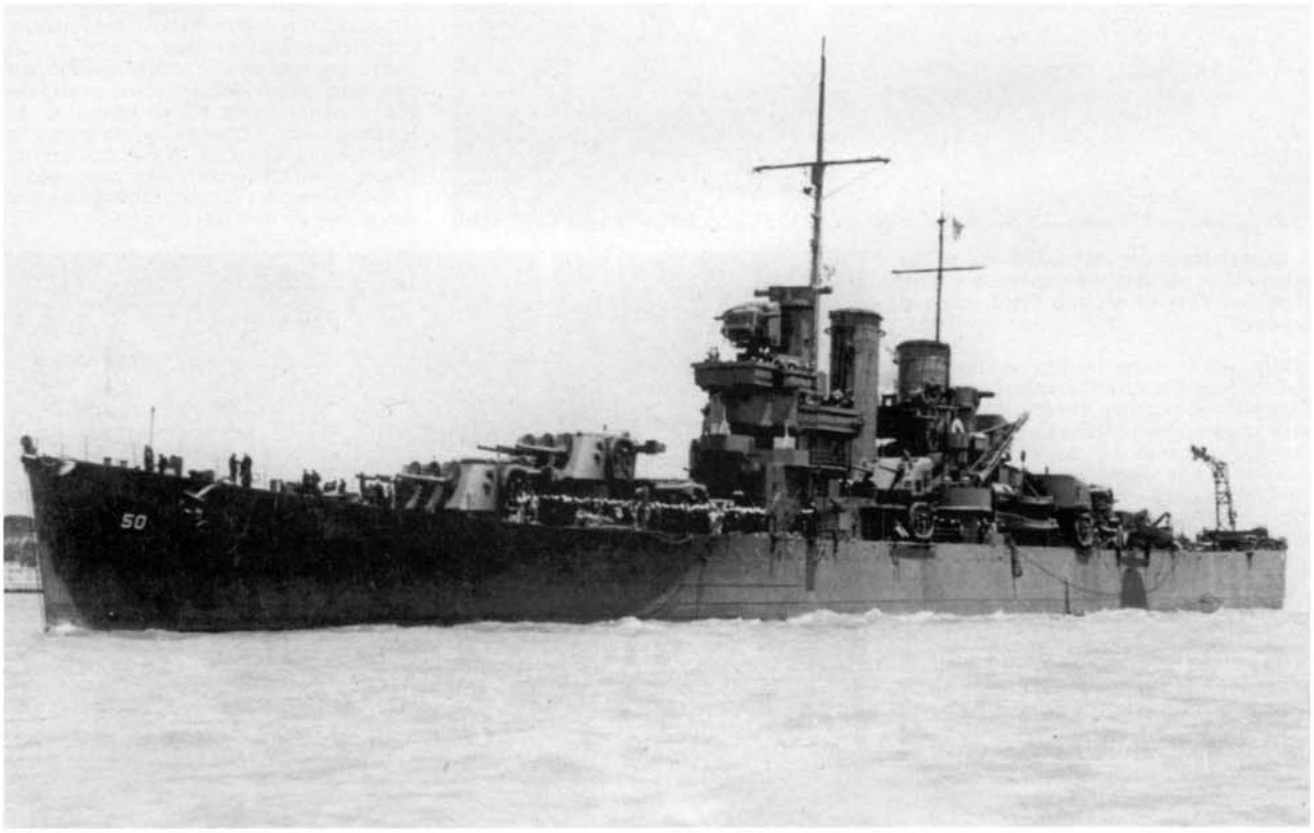
With Allied forces landing on the mainland of New Georgia, the Japanese altered their plans accordingly. On July 2, army and navy commanders agreed that Sasaki would coordinate all ground forces in New Georgia and next day he shifted the third battalion of the 229th from Kolombangara to reinforce the defences east of Munda field. It is probable also that he moved his headquarters from Kolombangara to the Munda area at this time. With most of the 229th Infantry now available at Munda, Sasaki planned in typical Japanese fashion to launch a counter-attack on the Allies at Rendova, aiming to take his troops in landing craft in the darkness, mingle unnoticed (it was hoped) with the American PT boats and so achieve surprise, but the 8th Fleet Headquarters, ordered the plan cancelled. Nevertheless, the Japanese high command was determined to hold New Georgia as long as possible and the army agreed to a further commitment of troops from the 6th Kumamoto Division (consisting of the 13th, 23rd and 45th Regiments) stationed on Bougainville. In the light of their 'painful battle experience in the Guadalcanal Island operation', the Japanese later declared they intended to throw in their 'entire sea, land and air strength at the first sign of an enemy landing'. It was in fact the Tokyo Express (the Allies' name for the Japanese destroyer transports) attempting to land the 2nd Battalion of Colonel Satoshi Tomonari's 13th Infantry that had encountered Ainsworth's bombardment force and sank *Strong* on the night of July 4/5.

In 1995, the author and Alfred Bisili, a scout for the Americans in 1943, made their way back into the ridge area north of Ilangana. Time had done its work and the only traces of the war that could be found in the heavy undergrowth were chunks of coral and bottles scattered on the dark jungle floor.

Allied and Japanese warships operating at night in the waters around New Georgia faced a multitude of threats not just from surface units but from submarines, mines, and aircraft. *Right*: **Here, *Nicholas* (DD 449), a veteran of Guadalcanal, fires on Japanese aircraft off Vella Lavella in August 1943. (US Navy)**

The next night, July 5/6, the Japanese tried again and brought on the first major surface action of the campaign, the Battle of Kula Gulf. Rear-Admiral Teruo Akiyama commanding two transport groups and one support group, altogether a force of ten destroyers, left Buin after sunset to deliver the troops and supplies to Vila. He was spotted from the air and Halsey ordered Ainsworth, who was nearing Tulagi, to turn and head back up the Slot. Two destroyers from Tulagi joined up with his force to replace *Strong* and the damaged *Chevalier*, bringing Ainsworth's force to three light cruisers and four destroyers. When Ainsworth arrived in Kula Gulf, three of Akiyama's destroyers were unloading at Vila and the other seven were in two groups on a course north along the eastern shore of Kolombangara. At 0157, Ainsworth's guns opened fire and Akiyama's torpedoes hit the water. Akiyama's flagship, *Niitsuki*, was hit repeatedly and sank, the other two destroyers in the support group, *Suzukaze* and *Tanikaze*, both suffered some damage as they headed north-west out of the battle. But three torpedoes found *Helena*, the first blowing her bow off at No. 2 turret and the second and third buckling her in the

Just a month before, the *Nicholas* had been involved in the Battle of Kula Gulf (between the north-western shore of New Georgia and Kolombangara island) in which the *Helena* (CL 50) (*below*) **was sunk. She was a light cruiser of the St Louis class and was also a veteran of one of the fiercest surface actions of World War II: the night action against Japanese battleships that heralded the beginning of the naval Battle of Guadalcanal on November 13, 1942. (US Navy)**



As it had in the battle for Guadalcanal, the Imperial Japanese Navy gave a good account of itself in the series of actions touched off by the invasion of New Georgia. But it was a war of attrition the Japanese could not hope to win. Captain Tameichi Hara commanded destroyers in the Solomons from Guadalcanal through New Georgia to the bitter end at Bougainville, and survived to write his memoirs. He recalled his feelings on the bridge of *Shigure* on the dark night of August 1 as his four destroyers entered Blackett Strait bound for Vila, Kolombangara to deliver supplies. It was his first sortie since returning to the Solomons after his destroyer had been badly damaged by *Helena* in the naval battle of Guadalcanal the past November. 'In my absence from action,' he wrote, 'the seas of the Central Solomons had claimed many illustrious destroyers. *Kagero, Kuroshio, and Oyashio* — veterans of Tanaka's victorious battle off Savo Island — were sunk by mines and air attack on May 8, 1943. My Java Sea battle teammate, *Nagatsuki,* and *Niizuki* were lost in these waters in July. *Hatsuyuki,* hero of the October 12, 1942 Savo Island battle, was blasted into the ocean depths near Bougainville on July 17.' If it was any consolation that *Helena,* his opponent at Guadalcanal, now herself lay broken in two in the depths of the ocean off Kula Gulf, Hara did not mention it. *Nagatsuki* is shown in this photograph dated May 8, 1944 aground and bombed out on the east coast of Kolombangara, a victim of the same battle that sent *Helena* to the bottom almost a year before. She was a 'Mutsuki' class destroyer built in 1926 by Ishikawajima and armed with the 24-inch torpedo. In 1941-42, she was modified for use as a fast transport which increased her tonnage from 1,313 to 1,590 tons and reduced her speed from 37 to 34 knots. (US Navy).

middle and causing her to sink 20 minutes after the third hit. About 200 of the crew perished with the ship, but almost 1,000 were rescued (over 100 of these on July 16 after they had drifted to Vella Lavella).

The battle then shifted to the second transport group. Of these, *Amagiri* and *Hatsuyuki* were both hit, but were able to turn away into the gulf while *Satsuki* and *Nagatsuki* in the rear reversed course and headed back south toward Vila. In the darkness and without radar, *Nagatsuki*, which had taken one direct hit in the action, ran hard aground at Surumuni Cove about five miles north of Vila. The ships were now scattered and Ainsworth, thinking the battle was over and low on both fuel and ammunition, retired, leaving *Radford* and *Nicholas* to pick up *Helena's* survivors. During the next hours, *Radford* and *Nicholas* worked at their task unaware that several miles away *Amagiri* was doing the same for *Niitsuki's* crew. Meanwhile, *Satsuki* tried to pull *Nagatsuki* off the reef, but gave up and according to the Japanese records landed her troops at Vila. The troops on *Nagatsuki* marched overland to Vila while the crew stayed with the stranded ship. Shortly before dawn, *Nicholas* and *Amagiri* saw each other, stopped their rescue operations, and exchanged torpedoes none of which hit and then went to the guns. Hit once again, *Amagiri* make smoke and retired to the north. One by one the remaining combatants left the area except for doomed *Nagatsuki*. Next morning, the Dauntlesses and Avengers duly appeared followed that afternoon by B-25s and by day's end, finally abandoned by her crew, *Nagatsuki* had been gutted by fire and her bow blown off. The Occupation Force G-2 Daily Summary for the day noted that smoke from the beached destroyer was 'pouring up to 8,000 feet'.

This single piece of metal portruding from the water marks the final resting place of the rusting bones of *Nagatsuki* today. Following the war, a salvage group blew up the wreck and sold off the scrap. While staying at Agnes Lodge on the shore at the eastern end of Munda Field, the author was shown a well-kept Japanese tea kettle said to have come from *Nagatsuki.* A ship's bell at Tiropou School, however, reportedly from the Japanese vessel, turned out to be marked USN!

One of the four undamaged Model 3, 14cm Japanese naval guns at Enogai that the Marine Raiders captured on July 10, 1943. A marine digging a foxhole discovered one of the hastily-buried breech-blocks and a search turned up the other three. (USMC)

THE FIGHT FOR MUNDA FIELD — NORTHERN SECTOR

'Toenails' called for the Liversedge force to capture Enogai and Bairoko Harbor in order to isolate the Japanese defending Munda while the main offensive effort would be made by the 43rd Division from east of the field. On paper the plan looked good and the hope for a campaign of short duration seemed reasonable. This did not, however, reckon with the New Georgia jungle, the likes of which the Allies had not faced before. There were no roads and movement was by trails, some of which had been used by the Solomon Islanders and others that had to be cut ahead of the troops (the author can vouch from his own experience that one can be on one of these trails and not notice any difference from the rest of the jungle). Rains turned knee-deep rivers into swollen torrents and made the swampy areas impassable. Against this type of terrain, the best the bulldozers and carry-alls of the 43rd engineers could do was about 200 yards of road a day. Such terrain naturally favoured the defenders. The Japanese were able to construct pillboxes and large bunkers out of logs, coral and earth that were impregnable against small-arms fire. Under these conditions, the Allied attack stalled from the beginning.

In the northern sector, Liversedge moved out shortly after the landing was completed on July 5. The going was slow and not until July 7 did he make the head of Enogai Inlet. Here the forces split, the 3rd Battalion, 148th Infantry, moving toward the Bairoko-Munda Trail to establish a block, the 1st Battalion, Marine Raiders, and two companies of the 3rd Battalion, 145th Infantry, moving up the western side of the inlet toward Enogai

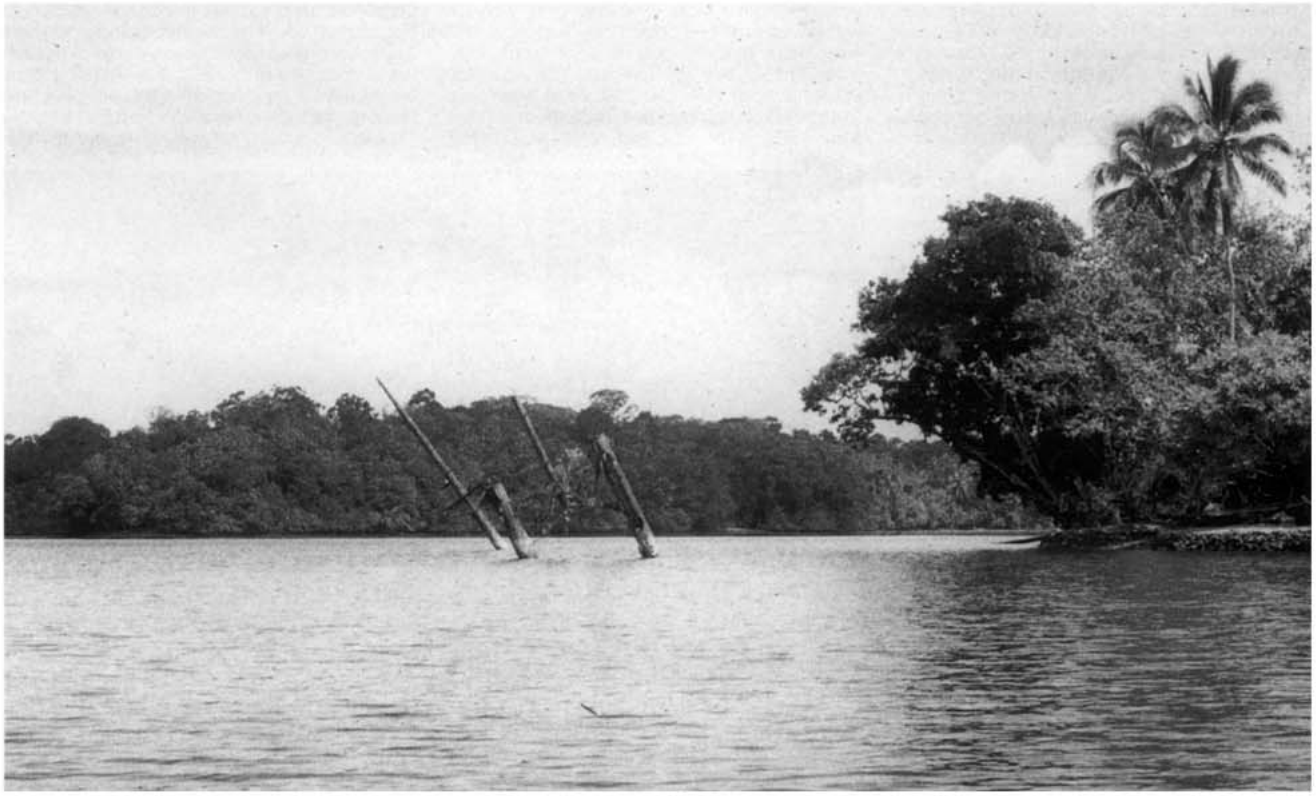
One of the Japanese 14cm guns photographed by the author in July 1995. The four guns are close to shore and spaced fairly evenly around Enogai Point. The remains of the American supply dump is also still evident.

Point. A sharp fight occurred at Triri village and this and the terrain again slowed down the advance. Finally, on July 10, the raiders took Enogai Point after some heavy fighting that cost 54 dead and 91 wounded and captured the four 14cm guns there. By this time, food shortages were so acute that an air drop had to be made by C-47s. On July 11, the raiders mopped up Enogai and established their own base there, weathering two Japanese air strikes without any anti-aircraft weapons of any type. PBYs coming in to take off the sick and wounded were attacked and damaged by Japanese float planes, but were able at dusk to get off with their human cargos. Given his losses from combat and sickness and the determined Japanese defence to be expected at Bairoko, Liversedge paused at Enogai and asked for reinforcements. Meanwhile, during July 10-11, fighting was going on at the trail block as elements of the Japanese 13th Infantry en route to the Munda front attacked the American 148th. One post-war Japanese account has the Americans annihilated after two days, but this was patently not the case and the trail block was not withdrawn until July 17 and then in preparation for the attack on Bairoko Harbor. On the other hand, the trail block failed to stop the Japanese reinforcements from reaching Munda, for they shifted to another trail that was unobstructed.

Liversedge, resupplied and reinforced by the 4th Marine Raider Battalion (veterans of the eastern New Georgia landings on June 30), made the attack on Bairoko Harbor on July 20. He had no heavy weapons or flamethrowers to use against the Japanese bunkers and an air strike he requested never materialised due to bureaucratic miscommunication back at Guadalcanal. Consequently, after a day's furious fighting in which the Americans suffered 50 men killed and 200 wounded, mostly from the two raider battalions, the attack was stopped cold. Late that afternoon and less than 500 yards from his objective of Bairoko Harbor, Liversedge gave the order to withdraw several hundred yards and dig in for the night. Next morning, under cover of a heavy air strike, Liversedge took his forces back to Enogai and that afternoon, harassed by Japanese fighters, PBYs began taking off the wounded. For the rest of July, the Americans sat tight at Enogai. While their presence there tied down Japanese troops that could have been used elsewhere, the objective of choking off the stream of reinforcements moving from Kolombangara through Bairoko to the Munda front had failed.

Nor could the flow of troops be stopped on the first leg of the route from Bougainville to Kolombangara although the Allied surface and air forces took a heavy toll. On July 12/13, Ainsworth again intercepted the Tokyo Express which resulted in the Battle of Kolombangara, fought just north of the island after which it is named. This time Ainsworth had three light cruisers, New Zealand *Leander* replacing *Helena* sunk in the previous engagement, and ten destroyers to oppose Rear-Admiral Shunji Izaki in light cruiser *Jintsu* who with five destroyers was escorting four destroyer transports. The battle opened an hour after midnight and in the first phase, Ainsworth had the best of it. *Jintsu* was smothered by gun-fire, took at least one torpedo, and sank quickly, taking with her Izaki and most of the crew. Only one Japanese torpedo found its mark, hitting *Leander* and putting her out of action. In the second phase, however, after the Japanese destroyers retired north-west into a rain squall and reloaded their torpedo tubes, the tide of battle flowed in the other direction. This time the Japanese torpedoes found their mark, sinking destroyer *Gwin* and damaging both *Honolulu* and *St. Louis*. As Ainsworth's cruisers limped toward Tulagi, the four Japanese destroyer transports unloaded over 1,000 troops at Sandfly Harbor on the west coast of Kolombangara. A few nights later, on July 19/20, the Japanese attempted to set a trap, sending three destroyers as bait toward Vella Gulf with about 500 men and equipment and supplies while a large force of three heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, and nine destroyers waited for the American force to arrive. But a Black Cat (PBY) spotted the Japanese first and what showed up shortly after midnight were TBF Avengers with 2,000lb bombs. Destroyer *Yugure* was sunk and a heavy cruiser hit and damaged. Several more attacks were made before dawn and the Japanese decided to retire, leaving behind destroyer *Kiyonami* to pick up *Yugure's* survivors. When daylight came, American bombers sank *Kiyonami*. It is not clear where the transports landed the troops and supplies, possibly at Vila by way of Blackett Strait, but they too were attacked by aircraft as they returned.

After July 20, therefore, the Japanese did not attempt again to send surface units into Kula Gulf. Instead, when they dared risk destroyer transports, they shifted to Vella Gulf on the western side of Kolombangara and made their way to the landing points by way of the narrow Blackett Strait. In addition, they made extensive use of *Daihatsus*, large landing craft which the Allies insisted on calling barges. The most usual type was 46 feet long and could carry one tank, or 70 men or ten tons of cargo with a speed of around eight knots. With a steel hull and an armament of machine guns and cannon up to 37mm, they were a match for the PT boats that put out from Rendova Harbor every night to hunt them.



Bairoko Harbor, objective of the Liversedge force, pictured in July 1995 looking west from the eastern shore where the Japanese defences were located (the mouth of the harbour to the right in the photograph is due north). The sunken ship is thought to be the small Japanese freighter *Kashi Maru* (spelled *Kasi* in the Lloyds of London Registry), built in Osaka in 1940 and sunk in an Allied air attack on July 2. Australian Peter Woodbury, who has done considerable research on wrecks around New Georgia, is reasonably certain of the identification. *Kashi Maru* was carrying a cargo of fuel drums and ammunition ranging from what appears to be 14cm to 37mm when she was attacked and an internal explosion blew her side out. Today, along with the 7,000-ton cargo ship, *Toa Maru*, which was carrying supplies, ammunition and a small tank when hit by an aircraft and run aground off Gizo on January 31, 1943, the ship is an attraction for divers.

THE FIGHT FOR MUNDA FIELD — SOUTHERN SECTOR

The attack on Munda, it will be recalled, was to be made from east of the field by the 43rd Division. The main Japanese defence line, manned by three battalions of the 229th Infantry, some units of the 8th Combined SNLF, and artillery and anti-tank units (later reinforced by the 13th Infantry; the 2nd Battalion, 230th Infantry; and some troops of the 228th Infantry) ran from Ilangana on Roviana Lagoon north-west for some 3,000 yards. The defences centered on mutually supporting pillboxes of logs and coral, some having two levels so that the men inside could drop down during shelling, and all extremely well concealed. Hester's plan called for the 172nd on the left and the 169th on the right to advance from Zanana to the Barike river and with the river as the line of departure launch the assault on July 7. Two days later, the 3rd Battalion, 103rd, along with the tanks of the 9th Marine Defense Battalion would land at the western tip of Munda Point. Allied leaders envisioned a 'quick stroke' that would deliver the airfield into their hands in a few days. It was not to be. A month of hard fighting and the commitment of most of three divisions would be necessary before the field was taken. 'When I look back on "Elkton",' Halsey wrote four years later, 'the smoke of charred reputations still makes me cough.'

Hester's attack never gained momentum. The 172nd moved to its position at the Barike river without opposition, but a trail block set by one company of the Japanese 229th on the upper reaches of the river halted the 169th. After a two-day delay, the attack commenced on July 9 following an artillery barrage that put 6,000 rounds on Japanese positions, a naval bombardment that added 2,000 rounds, and an air strike that delivered 70 tons of high explosives. Next day, the artillery put 4,000 rounds and the planes another 67 tons of bombs, but on the ground very little progress was made; the 172nd took some of the forward positions, but the 169th remained stalled. On July 11, Hester made some changes. The commander of the 169th, his executive officer, intelligence officer and operations officer were all relieved of command and a regimental commander from the 37th Division took over the 169th. On the ground, Hester who had earlier abandoned the plan of landing at Munda Point, instead ordered the 172nd to disengage and turn south and take Laiana in order to shorten his line and to provide a landing site for reinforcements. That night, July 11/12, four light cruisers and ten destroyers put almost 8,000 rounds into the Munda area; a few hours later, as the 172nd fought its way toward Laiana, dive-bombers struck the enemy positions. Next day, the 172nd took Laiana and the 3rd Battalion, 169th, took the first of the fortified ridges in its sector and held on against furious Japanese counter-attacks. As the situation began to improve, reinforcements began landing, the 3rd Battalion, 103rd Infantry, and the 9th Marine Defense Battalion tanks at Laiana on July 14, and the 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry, at Zanana, the following day. Japanese efforts to interdict the Laiana landings with artillery fire had little effect and a 75-plane air strike on July 15, the largest the Japanese had mounted since the Rendova landings, was intercepted by 31 Allied fighters, the latter claiming 15 bombers and 29 fighters destroyed.

On July 15, also, the Allies began to reorganise their effort. Turner was relieved of his command and replaced by Rear Admiral Theodore Wilkinson and Hester was relieved of command of the New Georgia Occupation Force by Major General Oscar W. Griswold, commander of XIV Corps. Henceforth, Griswold would direct operations while Hester would only command the 43rd Division. While Turner's relief had been planned in order to free him to command the upcoming operations against the Gilbert Islands, Hester's relief was tied directly to the problems at Munda. Griswold had arrived with part of his staff on July 11 and did not like what he saw. Casualties from combat had not been excessive — by July 17 according to the official army historian the 43rd had lost 90 killed and some 600 wounded — but disease had put another 1,000 men out of action and, more worrying to the Allied command, hundreds of troops were leaving the line with what was called 'war neurosis'. Under these circumstances, Griswold was certain that the 43rd could not take Munda and, two days before he took command, requested that the rest of the 37th Division and the 25th Division be sent.

Once in command, Griswold set about preparing for the final offensive scheduled to begin July 25. The supply system was reorganised by establishing a dump for each division on two of the islands where the ships from Guadalcanal could unload supplies and landing craft then transport them to Laiana. Medical services were also improved.

A 155mm howitzer of Battery B, 136th Field Artillery, firing on Munda from Honiavasa Island on July 8. Honiavasa Passage separates the spot from Dume Island. Professor Day comments that 'the Signal Corps photographer described the location as Baraulu Island, which is the name of the village on the eastern end of the island, and this and other documents that made the same mistake have led military historians to follow suit. However, it should be noted that the rough maps brought back by the pre-invasion reconnaissance parties accurately identified the islands.' (Signal Corps)

The invasion troops were by no means solely American. Here, five Fijians and a New Zealand corporal of the 1st Commando, Fijian Guerrillas, are pictured on July 15, 1943, in the deep bush east of Munda. (Signal Corps)

Colonel Franklin T. Hallam, XIV Corps surgeon, who arrived on July 14 when the problem of war neurosis was at its peak, placed some blame on inadequate leadership, but found that the major cause was utter physical exhaustion for which rest areas and better medical facilities were required. By the end

A Signal Corps photographer on the north-western tip of Kokorana Island captured this pyrotechnics display at 0300 hrs on July 12 as the light cruisers *Montpelier, Denver, Columbia* and *Cleveland,* together with a dozen destroyers, shelled Munda from the Blanche Channel. The battleship *North Carolina* had originally been scheduled to take part in the bombardment but she was later replaced by *Denver* and *Cleveland*. As it turned out, no battleships saw action in the New Georgia campaign. (Signal Corps)

A few hours later, as daylight broke over Roviana Lagoon, the same photographer, standing at the same spot on Kokorana Island, recorded American Douglas SBD dive-bombers leaving the scene after their attack on Munda. The target is visible in the lower left of the photograph under a cloud of smoke. (Signal Corps)

Roviana Lagoon in 1995 from the identical location on Kokorana. The outline of Kolombangara can be seen in the background.

Left: **Lieutenant James W. Dougherty of VMSB 144 pictured sitting on the wing of his SBD-4 dive-bomber in the Russells in July 1943. On July 23, flying BuNo (Bureau Number) 10348, he was shot down during a strike on Japanese installations at Kindu on Gurasai Point and made a forced landing in Rendova Harbor just off what had been east landing beach during the invasion. Both he and his gunner, Robert Bernard, escaped from the plane unhurt and were rescued. (Jim Dougherty)**

Right: **In 1992, the author identified Dougherty's plane in 12 metres of water resting in the silt of Rendova Harbor and, through a series of fortunate circumstances, the Dougherty family learned of the plane's existence. In 1995, Jim Dougherty was reunited with his plane when he donned diving gear and went down and sat in the cockpit as the subject of the film *Lost Warriors of the South Pacific,* produced by Kevin Juergenson and Bob Keet of Pacific Media Associates.**

of July, the 17th Field Hospital had arrived and rest areas had been set up on Rendova. On the ground, Griswold planned for a two-division front and by July 22 the units were in place. Hester's 43rd Division consisting of the 103rd less its 1st Battalion and the 172nd was along the coast on the American left; Major General Robert S. Beightler's 37th Division, consisting of the 145th less its 3rd Battalion, the 148th less its 3rd Battalion, and the 161st attached from the 25th Division, occupied the center and the right. The 169th had been withdrawn for rest and so, all told, Griswold had five regiments with 12 battalions for the attack.

Before these preparations were complete, the Japanese attempted to launch a counter-attack. Sasaki's plan was to send the newly arrived 13th Infantry to circle around the American line to the north and, in conjunction with a landing on the beach behind the lines by troops of the 7th SNLF, attack the rear. At the same time, the 229th would attack the American positions on the front. The plan had real possibilities. Griswold's reinforcements were not yet in place and if the attack on the rear succeeded in cutting communications with the front, the regiments in the line would find themselves surrounded. But the jungle was as implacable an enemy of the Japanese as it was of the Allies. The 13th Infantry hacking its way through the undergrowth took three days to get around the American line to the Barike river. Heavy artillery fire prevented the SNLF's landing operation from ever starting. Communications broke down and when the 13th made its attack on the night of July 17/18, apparently only the 1st Battalion was involved. The Japanese homed in on the American positions in the rear by the smell of cigarette smoke and overran some of the ration dumps and surrounded the 43rd Division command post at Zanana. The collection of troops at the command post, however, made do with whatever weapon could be had and drove off the Japanese and set up a perimeter defence. This action and highly effective artillery fire which was called in on the Japanese during the night, ended the threat. On the front, the 229th attacked Laiana and the American positions on Kelly Hill (named after an officer killed there), and were beaten back in both attempts. For the next few days, groups of Japanese troops, some of which may have been the survivors of the Hara detachment at Viru Harbor who were making their way back to Munda, operated in the American rear and a number of skirmishes occurred. But the counter-attack, if such it can be called so great was the confusion, was a failure.

The XIV Corps offensive began on July 25 as scheduled. The morning haze still hung over the Munda area when the first of seven destroyers under the command of Commander Arleigh A. Burke opened fire on the Japanese positions in front of the waiting American troops. When the bombardment ended at 0644, the destroyers had put 4,000 5-inch shells on the target. The first Allied planes arrived over the target while the destroyers were still firing. Over 250 planes struck Munda that morning, practically everything at Guadalcanal that could fly, and a half million pounds of explosives was dropped. It was the 'greatest show on earth', the 23rd Squadron, 5th Bomb Group (H), recorded. 'The crews of the planes participating plus all the ground officers who had been able to talk themselves into a ride on the mission were thrilled at the sight of dozens of B-24s, B-25s, TBFs, SBDs, P-38s, P-39s, P-40s, F4Fs and F4Us milling around over the target in coordinating attacks while destroyers stood off shore and lobbed shells into Jap positions.'

One of the 75mm guns that was Dougherty's target the day he was shot down still sits in the jungle at Kindu. The dive-bombers flew up The Slot climbing to 16,000-17,000 feet by the time they reached the north-west tip of New Georgia. They then turned south and, with flaps closed, dived on their targets at speeds sometimes reaching 500 knots. At about 2,500 feet the bombs — one 1,000lbs and two of 100lbs — were released, and at around 1,000 feet the pilot pulled out and left the area in level flight.

A flame-thrower in operation against a Japanese pillbox in the coconut palms along the beach from Ilangana to Lambeti, the 103rd Infantry's area in the drive on Munda. Roviana Lagoon is in the background. (Signal Corps)

At 0700, the artillery began firing the first of a hundred preparations that would be fired that day and as the guns shifted their fire farther west, the infantry moved to the attack. In addition to the M3A1 'Stuart' light tanks of the 9th and 10th Marine Defense Battalions, the infantry for the first time in the Pacific war had flame-throwers.

At the beginning, progress was slow. The main Japanese defences confronted the attackers and a week of gruelling fighting was required to break through these. In the 43rd's sector, the strong points were along the beach at Ilangana and inland at Shimizu Hill; in the 37th's sector, they were in some depth on and around Bartley Ridge and Horseshoe Hill. Against this main line, the attack ground on, yard by yard, pillbox by pillbox. The assault troops went about their deadly work as methodically as a civilian work force on the job. Prior to the assault, a number of patrols of four or five men probed the suspected strong point to develop the extent of the position. Since many of the positions held their fire, this was followed by a reconnaissance in force by a reinforced platoon to uncover a portion of the centre of resistance (although in the jungle the concealment was such that the full extent of the strong point would not be known until the attack started). The attack then went forward in three stages. First, artillery was called in to provide shock action and to improve visibility. Second, intensive 81mm mortar fire which proved very effective, was placed on the area between the front lines and the nearest artillery impact area and on all observed positions. Third, while a holding attack by a platoon or company delivered covering fire with both heavy and light machine guns, the riflemen, using grenades and flame-throwers (if the latter were available), enveloped and reduced the position. With nightfall, the assault unit dug in and established a perimeter defence with strict fire discipline. Only the perimeter guards were permitted to fire, but they were under orders to fire at anything that moved whether inside or outside the perimeter. At least one soldier was shot when he left his foxhole to urinate, but the procedure stopped Japanese counter-attacks in their tracks and put an end to the night harassment tactics that had so rattled the 169th earlier in the month.

For the men doing the fighting, the war in the jungle was at close range and as a result was intensely personal. Rocks were thrown, insults exchanged.

'Americans cowards', the Japanese would taunt.

'Tojo eats ____!', the Americans would yell back.

Opponents were nicknamed so that a Japanese rifleman who was an excellent marksman was called 'Button' by the two infantrymen who set out to kill him using homemade Molotov cocktails. Describing the fighting on Bartley Ridge, *Yank* combat correspondent Mack Morriss wrote that 'it reached the point where individual action and individual courage were knitted together in two-and three-men units of assault, pitted against similar little units of Japs crouched in pillboxes. And the best fighters won because they cooperated with each other best.'

Although the issue was never in doubt, the Japanese missed a golden opportunity on the north flank of the American line. Colonel Stuart A. Baxter's 148th Infantry (less its 3rd Battalion which was at Bairoko) was on the extreme right and faced no prepared Japanese positions. On July 25, therefore, when the offensive started, Baxter's battalions advanced rapidly and quickly outdistanced the unit on its left, the 161st. By July 28, the 148th was just east of Bibilo Hill and contact with the 161st which was reducing the ridge positions had been lost. The first hint of trouble came on July 27 when a platoon of the 117th Engineer Battalion which was using a bulldozer to extend the trail in the area north of Horseshoe Hill was ambushed and three men were killed. Next day, the 148th's ration dump was attacked and the

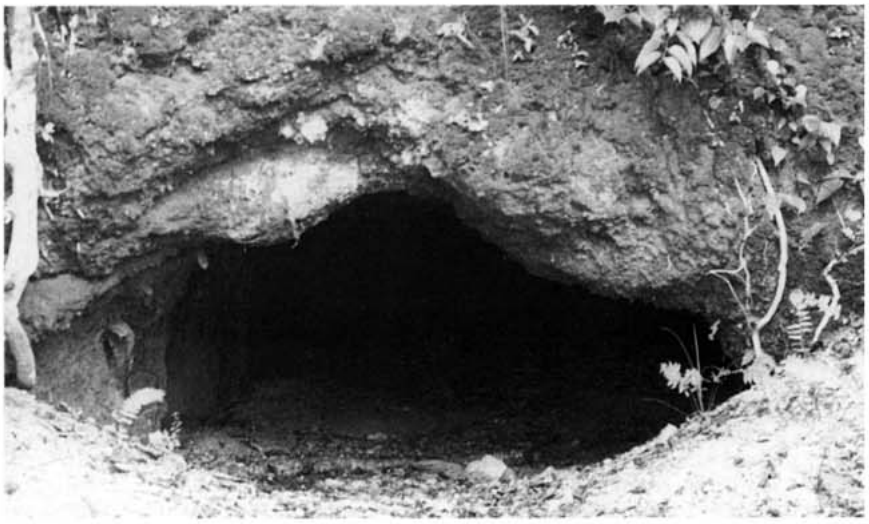
In 1995, the remains of a pier marks the area on the beach at Ilangana that the older inhabitants of Munda still call 'General's Landing'. Barges also unloaded trucks and other heavy cargo at this spot according to those old enough to remember.

Japanese infantrymen had dug in on Kokenggolo Hill and most of them died defending their positions. What appears to be drums for the Japanese Model 92 7.7mm machine gun can be seen on the roof of the entrance. (USMC)

supply trail cut. The enemy forces coming into the gap between the 148th and the 161st were from the 13th Infantry which American intelligence had lost track of since the counter-attack on July 18. General Beightler ordered Baxter to withdraw and link up with the 161st and, late in the morning on July 29, the 148th began fighting its way back to the American lines. Harried by Japanese attacking their rear, the first elements reached the 1st Battalion, 161st, dug in on O'Brien Hill late in the afternoon of July 30 and passed through the lines. The pursuing Japanese ran flush into the 1st Battalion's machine guns and a battle started that did not end until the next day when the Japanese withdrew. The main body of the 148th, however, running low on water and carrying over 100 wounded men, was still cut off. On July 31, as the 148th fought its way along the trail, Private Rodger Young single-handedly destroyed a Japanese machine gun that had pinned down an entire platoon, but at the cost of his life. His platoon was able to withdraw safely and he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his self-sacrifice. (In 1945, Frank Loesser wrote a ballad about Young that became a popular hit — see *After the Battle* No. 72, page 53.) The day after Young was killed, the 148th rejoined the American lines.

All along the front, Japanese resistance was weakening as Sasaki began to withdraw his troops. On July 29, a staff officer from 8th Fleet had arrived at Munda with orders for Sasaki to withdraw to a line extending from Munda Point north-east thus giving up the airfield. Sasaki and his officers argued for withdrawing even farther, but were overruled. With the Japanese defensive positions only lightly manned, the American forces found the going easier. In the south, the 43rd (with the 169th now relieving the 172nd) fought its way through what was left of Les Gill's Lambeti Plantation and reached the edge of the airfield by August 1. In the north, the 37th had reached Bibilo Hill. During the next three days, the remaining Japanese were cleared from their caves in Bibilo and Kokenggolo Hills and, on August 5, the assault troops were finally able to take a bath in the sea. One month to the day after the Fijian scouts located Sasaki's first trail block on the upper Barike, Munda Field belonged to the Allies.

The prize seemed hardly worth the effort. Unused by the Japanese and churned by shells and bombs, one of the first Seabees on the scene remarked later that 'I wasn't sure whether we were on the field or not'. But as *Yank* correspondent Morriss put it, 'the Army took Munda field and went on fighting, the Navy put Munda into operation and went on working'. By August 7, the 73rd and 24th Seabees had the field in good enough condition for emergency landings; by August 13 it was ready for use as a base. Next day, two marine fighter squadrons, VMF 123 and VMF 124, flew their Corsairs into Munda. It was the beginning of the transformation of Munda into one of the largest and most-used airbases in the South Pacific.



Although the construction of the bomber base at Munda removed part of Kokenggolo Hill, some of the Japanese caves still remain, this photograph being taken by the author in 1995.

Above: **Seabees of the 73rd and 24th Battalions went to work immediately, often enduring shell-fire from the two 12cm Japanese guns at Banga, to make Munga airfield operational. The Japanese had surfaced the 150ft x 3,000ft runway with coral but the remainder was soft and overgrown with grass. By August 14, the strip was ready, complete with taxiways, and 50 hardstands. (US Navy)** *Below*: **Munda Field in 1995 looking west. The small Solomon Airlines plane taking off is dwarfed by the size of the runway.**

THE JAPANESE WITHDRAWAL FROM NEW GEORGIA

With the airfield lost, the Japanese withdrew from the island of New Georgia. The 13th Infantry and the troops occupying Bairoko escaped to Kolombangara by way of Bairoko; the 229th and other units that had defended Munda withdrew toward Zieta and from there crossed to Banga. The 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, 6th Division, which had been prevented from landing at Munda on August 2 by American bombardment, had landed instead on Banga and begun digging in on the southern part of the island. Sasaki set up his headquarters on Banga on August 7, but moved on next day to Kolombangara.

The American pursuit was slow, the troops hampered as much by the jungle and the heavy equipment they carried as by enemy opposition. Since both the 43rd and 37th Divisions were now badly under strength as a result of the weeks of fighting, the 25th Division made up of the 27th Infantry, which had arrived on August 1 and the 161st which had gone back to its parent division after the fall of Munda, was given the task of driving the Japanese from New Georgia island. The 1st Battalion of the 27th followed by the 161st worked its way up the Munda-Bairoko Trail against very little opposition. By mid-August, the force was converging on Bairoko and on August 25 Bairoko was occupied without bloodshed, the last Japanese escaping by barge on the previous two nights. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 27th advancing toward Zieta with the Fijian scouts in front, faced more organised opposition. A number of sharp fights ensued, but Zieta was taken on August 15 and shortly thereafter, Piru Plantation on the coast (where the 9th Marine Defense Battalion's 155mm 'Long Toms' were emplaced by September 1 to fire on Vila). Major General J. Lawton Collins, the 25th Division commander, accompanied the 2nd and 3rd Battalions in what was to be his last battle in the South Pacific. The following year, he would command VII Corps in the offensive against Germany.

The 43rd was given the task of taking Banga. Command of the 43rd had been a bit like the game of musical chairs for the past few weeks. Hester, who had commanded the division during most of the campaign, had been relieved because of his health on July 29 by the commander of the Americal Division, Major General John R. Hodge. When Hodge returned to his own division on August 10, he was replaced by Brigadier General Harold R. Barker, commander of the 43rd Division's artillery, who served until August 21 when he was replaced by Major General Leonard F. Wing, the 43rd Assistant Commander, who was senior to Barker (for the rest of the war, Wing commanded the division, Barker the artillery). The fight for Banga lasted from August 10 until August 20 and ended with the Japanese slipping across to Arundel Island. The two naval guns that had fired on the destroyers on June 30 and then on the American forces on New Georgia were captured.

Left: **The guns at Banga Island were finally captured on August 20. Here, one of the 12cm guns is inspected by men of Company A of the 172nd Infantry. (Signal Corps)** *Above*: **Fifty years later, Professor Day found the pedestal mount still standing, although the barrel is almost hidden by undergrowth.**

The PT — or Patrol Torpedo-boat — was a war-winning tool in the Pacific where the little Elco and Higgins boats caused considerable damage and destruction to Japanese lines of communication. A base was established on New Georgia in Rendova Lagoon as soon as the first troops came ashore on June 30 and, nightly, the PT boats would set out to hunt from the base at Lumbaria, one of the small islands in the lagoon, seen here in a rare photograph made available to the author by Tom White, a member of the New Zealand radar crew stationed on the island at the time. The photograph dates from early August just after Japanese bombers had destroyed two boats at their moorings.

Sasaki, pressed back to Kolombangara, asked for additional troops with which to launch a counter-attack on New Georgia but the Japanese High Command had no intention of attempting to reinforce the area. Twice in early August, destroyer transports had made the run to Kolombangara in both instances using the route through Vella Gulf and Blackett Strait. The first resulted in a famous encounter with American PT boats while the second ended in disaster.

As we have seen, the first American PT base in New Georgia had been established on the islands of Lumbaria and Bau which formed part of Rendova Harbor. In addition to Squadron 9 which came in with the assault troops, Squadrons 5 and 10 arrived in July, followed by Squadron 11 in August. From the latter part of July to the end of the campaign, the PT boats were on the hunt almost nightly for Japanese barges that trafficked up and down the coasts of Kolombangara and the surrounding islands with cargos of troops and supplies. Torpedoes were useless against the shallow draft barges and the PTs began carrying 37mm cannon for added fire-power. Even then, barge hunting was a dangerous business. On more than one occasion, PT boats going in at high speed to attack the barges hugging the shore ran into concentrated fire from Japanese shore positions or grounded on an unmarked reef. On the night of September 6/7 for example, *PTs 118* and *172* hit a reef at such speed that *PT 172* put 50 feet of the reef astern before stopping and *PT 118* grounded up to her stern. The crews were saved, but the boats had to be destroyed.

Air attack, both by enemy planes and on occasion by friendly planes, accounted for the loss of PT boats, planes and casualties among the crews. One such case of mistaken identity occurred at dawn on September 30 when one of three Corsairs attacked *PT 126* wounding one officer and killing two men. *PT 126* returned the fire and shot down the Corsair.

To prevent mishaps resulting from mistaken identity, the PT boats were kept out of the combat area when Allied destroyers were operating. As a result, only one major confrontation between PT boats and Japanese destroyers occurred, this on the night of August 1/2 when the Japanese, avoiding Kula Gulf, sent four destroyers by way of Vela Gulf and Blackett Strait to Vila.

Fifteen boats from Rendova made the interception. The action itself was confused and ineffective; while at different times eight boats fired torpedoes, no damage whatsoever was done the enemy ships. But what happened next became one of the most celebrated events of World War II. The destroyers had unloaded and were returning at high speed through Blackett Strait when *Amagiri* which was leading *Hagikaze*, *Arashi* and *Shigure*, collided with *PT 109* commanded by Lieutenant (jg.) John F. Kennedy. Two men were killed and the rest were rescued with the help of the natives a week after the incident. Two weeks later, the episode was a page one story in the *New York Times* — 'Kennedy's Son is Hero in Pacific' — and before the war ended the incident had been skillfully publicised into a valuable political asset. (See *After the Battle* No. 9.)

The collision also brought *Amagiri* good fortune — at least for a time. Her bow was damaged and this probably saved her from the disaster that befell the other destroyers a few nights later. Heartened by the success of the August 1 mission, the Japanese decided to repeat it on August 6 and with *Kawakaze* replacing *Amagiri*, the four destroyers entered Vella Gulf shortly before midnight with replacements for the 13th Infantry on board. The moon had set and the sky was completely overcast; depending on the frequent rain squalls, visibility varied from 3,000 to 4,000 yards. Hidden against the blackness of Kolombangara were Destroyer Division Twelve — *Maury*, *Craven* and *Dunlap* — and Destroyer Division Fifteen — *Lang*, *Sterett*, and *Stack* — under the command of Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Division Twelve which was leading fired 24 torpedoes at the unsuspecting Japanese ships and then took evasive action to avoid any enemy torpedoes and to bring it into firing position later. At the same time, Division Fifteen was coming up on the port bow of the Japanese destroyers with guns ready. In minutes the battle was over. At 2346, explosions rocked the three leading Japanese destroyers as Division Twelve's torpedoes struck home and immediately Division Fifteen swung right to cut across the Japanese course and opened fire with all guns. At roughly 2351, *Kawakaze* turned over and sank and shortly after midnight *Hagikaze* and *Arashi* followed her. Some 200-300 Japanese made it to Vella Lavella, more than 1,500 soldiers and sailors perished. Only *Shigure* which had been lagging behind survived to tell the tale. The near-perfect action on the part of the American destroyers went into the history books as the Battle of Vella.

It was from the Lumbaria base that John Kennedy set out in *PT 109* on the night of August 1/2. *Left*: **Motor Machinists Mate Harold Marney was in the forward turret when the collision with *Amagiri* occurred after which he was never seen again.**

Back at the PT base in August 1943, his shipmates named a pier in his honour and erected this sign. (PT Boats, Inc.) *Right*: **The Solomon islanders who own the island maintain Lumbaria today as a tourist attraction.**

Men of the 3rd Battalion, 27th Infantry, crossing from Arundel to Sagakarasa Island on September 13, in the final mopping up operations against the Japanese in the area. (Signal Corps)

THE ISOLATION OF KOLOMBANGARA

Throughout the campaign, the Japanese had been preoccupied with the defence of Kolombangara. Before the battle for Munda, the bulk of the Japanese forces had been concentrated there and, when the attack on the airfield had begun, been fed into the battle unit by unit. Following the withdrawal from the island of New Georgia, the Japanese forces were once again concentrated there. To the Japanese command, the volcanic island whose name in the Roviana language means 'King of the Waters' appeared to be the next logical place to make a stand against the Allied advance up the Solomons. Vella Lavella, the north-western-most of the New Georgia group, was left unoccupied despite the fact that at Barakoma on the south-eastern tip, there was an excellent airfield site. Only a few hundred Japanese — survivors from the débâcle of Vella Gulf — were on the island.

Halsey, on the other hand, alarmed at the time consumed by the yard by yard advance on New Georgia, proposed on July 11 that the Allies isolate Kolombangara. A Northern Force under Admiral Wilkinson would seize Vella Lavella and build an airfield there while Griswold's New Georgia Occupation Force would occupy Arundel Island and bring Vila under the guns of the American artillery. During the last weeks of July and the first of August, reconnaissance parties landed on Vella Lavella and on August 15, the first of a succession of transports began landing the invasion force consisting of the 35th Regimental Combat Team (25th Infantry Division), the 4th Marine Defense Battalion, the 58th Seabees, and a Naval Base unit with its boat pool at Barakoma. There was no resistance on the ground, but the Japanese attempted, unsuccessfully, to destroy the landing force from the air. Marine fighters from Munda, the anti-aircraft guns of the 4th Marine Defense Battalion, and those on the destroyers and landing craft, broke up the attacks before any major damage was done. A defensive perimeter was quickly established and construction started on the airfield.

At first, the Japanese command at Rabaul disagreed as to how to react to Halsey's move. The navy apparently first argued for a counter-landing to be made using one battalion. The army, correctly estimating the Allied strength to be much larger than this, replied that a landing in such force would be 'like pouring water on a hot stone'. In the end, facing the fact that the New Georgia group was becoming untenable, the Japanese command decided to send in a force of infantry and naval personal to establish a barge base on the north-eastern tip of Vella Lavella at Horaniu in Kokolope Bay and thus provide a link in the evacuation route from Kolombangara. The plan was executed on the night of August 17/18 when Rear-Admiral Matsuji Ijuin put to sea with four destroyers to escort the barges to Vella Lavella. Early on, the Japanese force was spotted and four American destroyers under Captain Thomas J. Ryan headed out to meet them. As the two forces converged, both were aware of the other's presence and while TBFs bombed Ijuin's ships, Japanese float planes harassed the Americans. Ijuin's manoeuvres to keep away from a trap such as had been sprung earlier in the Battle of Vella Gulf and at the same time lure the Americans away from the barges was largely successful and the bulk of the landing force made Vella Lavella and no Japanese destroyer was lost. When the 'action' was over, both sides were left puzzled, the Japanese as to why the Americans had not concentrated on the barges to the exclusion of all else, the Americans as to why the Japanese had 'fled' without offering a fight.

The Japanese base at Horaniu, however, was short-lived. Late in August, the Vella Lavella ground commander, Colonel Everett E. Brown (35th Infantry), asked for reinforcements and received the 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry. When it arrived on August 31, he used it to replace the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, which he sent up the east coast of the island. Using landing craft for transportation and supply, the Americans met little resistance and with the Japanese retreating toward the north-western tip of the island, occupied Horaniu on September 14. On September 18, elements of the New Zealand 3rd Division under Major-General H. E. Barrowclough, including 14th Brigade under Brigadier Leslie Potter, landed on Vella Lavella. Barrowclough assumed command of the Northern Landing force and Potter's brigade (a New Zealand brigade was built around three infantry battalions and so was comparable to an American RCT) was given the task of clearing the island of Japanese. Potter began a pincers movement on September 21, with 37th Battalion moving from Horaniu around the east coast and 35th Battalion moving up the west coast. Fierce fighting resulted in early October as the pincers closed and the Japanese found themselves squeezed into a pocket at Marquana Bay on the north-west coast.

Meanwhile, the second part of Halsey's move against Kolombangara had begun on August 27 when the 172nd Infantry crossed to Arundel and landed without opposition. Two reinforced companies were sent on long-range patrols, one up the west coast and the other up the east coast. The west coast appeared to be free of enemy troops, but the patrol working its way up the east coast ran into strong Japanese resistance on September 1 just north of Stima Lagoon on the north-east shore of the island. Here the Japanese would make their stand. Sasaki, his plan to launch a counter-attack on Munda cancelled by his superiors in Rabaul, had not been made aware of the decision to evacuate the central Solomons. Consequently, he made plans to defend what the Japanese still held, assigning the defence of Kolombangara to the 8th Combined SNLF (6th Kure the western sector, 7th Yokosuka the eastern) and what was left of the 229th Infantry (Jack Harbor), sending the 2nd Battalion, 45th

The author came by canoe, in water often so shallow that he had to get out and wade, to visit the same location in 1995.

Airpower 1. By October, Munga Field had added considerably to US airpower in the Pacific and, by December, the 47th Naval Construction Battalion, 828th Aviation Engineers, and 131st Army Engineers had extended the runway to 8,000 feet and completed the transformation into a heavy bomber base. (US Navy)

Infantry, to Gizo, and beginning in late August, the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 13th Infantry, to Arundel to halt the American advance. Holding the high ground on north-east Arundel just across from Sagekarasa Island, the 13th Infantry put up such stout resistance that Griswold was forced to send in part of the 169th Infantry, all of the 27th Infantry, the tanks of the 11th Marine Defense Battalion, and a 4.2-inch mortar unit. The marine tanks went into action on September 17 and were effective against the Japanese defences.

That same evening, Colonel Bin Tomonari, the commander of the 13th Infantry, was killed by shell-fire as he received the report of one of his officers. Next day, the tanks tried again but this time the Japanese had put a 37mm anti-tank gun in place and two tanks were knocked out and the attack stalled. For the first time in many months, a Japanese veteran wrote, he and his comrades were able to hold their guns high and shout 'banzai'. But, he added, everyone realised that it was not the same 'banzai' they had shouted in China, that it was only a small victory. He was, of course, correct. Next morning, the marine tanks with good infantry support attacked again and this time drove the Japanese from their positions. With a suicide squad continuing to fight, the bulk of the Japanese withdrew to Kolombangara on the night of September 20/21.

Professor Day had to climb a tree on Kokenggolo Hill in order to photograph a small segment of the west end of the field.

Airpower 2. Major Gregory 'Pappy' Boyington, commander of VMF 214 — the famed 'Black Sheep' Squadron — in his F4U Corsair at the newly-constructed airfield on Vella Lavella on December 27, 1943. A few days later, on January 3, 1944, he was shot down, but not before he had downed the planes that were to make him the leading Marine ace of the war. Boyington was picked up by a Japanese submarine and spent the rest of the war in a Japanese prison camp. The popular American television series *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* (1976) claimed to be based on the exploits of the squadron. (US Navy)

Sergeant Dil Ferris, a photographer on the staff of *Yank*, took this photograph of Munda cemetery on a Sunday morning in the late spring of 1944. It was used to illustrate the article by Sergeant Barrett McGurn titled 'Munda: One Year Later' in the issue of September 15 that year. (Signal Corps)

THE JAPANESE EVACUATION

The Japanese were in fact preparing to evacuate the New Georgia group. The Allied airbase at Barakoma on Vella Lavella was nearing completion (it became operational on September 27) and Seabees were hard at work constructing a fighter strip and a naval base at Ondonga on the eastern shore of the Diamond Narrows. The Allied vise was clamping shut. On September 15, Sasaki was notified by a naval officer who arrived at Kolombangara that he and all of his troops were to be evacuated.

In preparation, all Japanese troops were withdrawn from Gizo and the surrounding islands as well as Arundel. Using destroyers which could made the run from Bougainville and back in a night and numerous barges which could make neighbouring Choiseul under cover of darkness, the Japanese waited for the dark of the moon (October 1/2 would be moonless). Then on the nights of September 28/29, October 1/2, and October 2/3, the mass transports left Kolombangara, the troops taking with them a few day's rations and leaving behind all their heavy weapons.

Correctly anticipating that the Japanese would move during the dark of the moon, American cruisers and destroyers searched the sea north and north-west of Vella Lavella. Success was limited. To keep mishaps from occurring because of mistaken identity, the PT boats were kept out of the area. After September 25, the fear of enemy submarines also caused the Allies to withhold the light cruisers. For their part, the Japanese waged a masterful campaign to confuse and harass the American destroyers and distract their attention from the barges. Surface units sortied and after being spotted, withdrew; float planes were as determined as flies over a spoil, dropping flares and an occasional bomb to keep the Allied destroyers pre-occupied with a possible air attack. On September 29, nonetheless, with no moon and visibility at 3,000 yards, four destroyers sank some barges caught off the coast of Kolombangara. During the night of October 1/2, American destroyers wreaked havoc on the Japanese barges until the 'water was thick with bodies', but a PBY sighting of Japanese destroyers lured the Americans away in a futile search. The night of October 2/3 was a repeat performance. Sources conflict and the numbers can only be considered approximate in the broadest sense of the term, but it seems likely that the Japanese succeeded in evacuating safely about 9,000 men while losing about 1,000.

OCTOBER 6/7, 1943

On the morning of October 6, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, landed on Kolombangara at Ringgi Cove just west of Vila. Patrols headed east but found nothing but abandoned guns and a few Japanese who had been left behind. One prisoner who first claimed to be a Korean cook for the 45th Infantry and later admitted that he was a Superior Private in the 6th Engineer Regiment, 6th Division, said that he had heard that the Americans killed all prisoners. This was why he had lied at first.

But the battle for New Georgia was destined to end not with a whimper but with a bang. That night the Japanese determined to evacuate their men from Vella Lavella where they were pinned in on Maraziana point between the New Zealand 35th and 37th Battalions. Six destroyers under Ijuin escorting a group of three destroyer transports and a group of sub-chasers and smaller craft made the attempt. Ijuin's force was spotted late in the afternoon, but the Americans had only three destroyers under Captain Frank R. Walker available, the rest being committed to convoy duty. Wilkinson ordered Walker to head for Vella Lavella and detached three additional destroyers under Captain Harold O. Larson from a convoy south of New Georgia and ordered them to the area. Walker, as expected, arrived before Larson, and at about an hour before midnight, the battle began between *Selfridge*, *O'Bannon*, and *Chevalier* on the one side and *Yugumo*, *Kazegumo*, *Isokaze*, *Akigumo* on the other (*Shigure* and *Samidare* had not yet joined up). The Americans drew first blood as gun-fire reduced *Yugumo* to a flaming wreck, but minutes later a torpedo from the latter made a fatal hit on *Chevalier*. *O'Bannon* collided with *Chevalier* and although the damage was not great, she too was out of the action. Only *Selfridge* was left and a few minutes later, she took a torpedo from the spread fired by *Shigure* and *Samidare*. By this time, Japanese planes had spotted Larson coming up from the south, reporting the force as cruisers; Ijuin turned away and headed for home. Larson arrived too late to take part in the battle, but assisted in picking up survivors from *Chevalier* and helping with the cripples. No one on the American side was aware that the Japanese sub-chasers had slipped in and taken off the almost 600 Japanese trapped by the New Zealanders. Next morning at dawn, four PT boats arrived to pick up survivors. A group from *Yugumo* were face down on the deck of *PT 163* when one was able to grab the gun of an American sailor and kill him as the latter gave him a drink of water. The Japanese sailor and three of his confederates were shot immediately. So ended the Battle of Vella Lavella as it was officially called.

And with it the battle for New Georgia. At a cost of slightly over 1,000 men killed and almost 4,000 wounded (to which must be added the casualties suffered by air and naval personnel as well as several thousand non-combat casualties due to disease and fatigue), the Allies had tightened the noose on Rabaul. Remember Halsey's words: 'Munda was blocking our path to Bougainville, Bougainville was blocking our path to Rabaul, and Rabaul was the keystone of the whole Japanese structure in the southern Pacific.'

The valiant but costly Japanese effort in New Georgia — XIV Corps counted almost 2,500 Japanese dead exclusive of Vella Lavella, and losses at sea and in the air would raise the total considerably — had largely been in vain. . . .

The cemetery site is known locally as Christmas Hill. After the war, the remains of the dead were removed. Only the memories of the local people and the concrete foundation of the altar used in services, which is hidden in the thick undergrowth to the left in the picture, testify to the fact that here hundreds of Allied soldiers were once laid to rest.

THE FORGOTTEN CRASH

By Brenda Price

'In the Temple to Second World War heroes, Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory does not stand next to Montgomery or Patton. No doubt the Air Marshal died too soon, and had no time to write his memoirs and leave a track of the part he played in history.'

So wrote Jean Pierre Garnier, head teacher of English at the Lycée d'Altitude at Briançon. The school is near the crash site of Leigh-Mallory's Avro York which came to grief in the mountains 30 miles east of Grenoble, France, on November 14, 1944, but was lost in snow and not found until June 1945. During a school trip to England in February 1995, Jean Pierre also visited the RAF Museum at Hendon with his students where he found a copy of *After the Battle* No. 39 relating the circumstances of the accident. He visited the crash site in June 1995, and thought of getting his senior students in technology to make an education project of it. The group also decided to create a museum, including relics from the crash.

My father, Sergeant Harold Chandler, who was the Air Marshal's personal steward, was one of the victims, and in the summer of 1994, my sister and I visited the cemetery where my father is buried in Le Rivier d'Allemont at the foot of the mountain. After my visit, Giuseppe and Carole Pace, who are close friends, travelled through Le Rivier and left my address at the local inn and in August 1995 I received a letter from Monsieur Garnier. In it he said he wanted to do a project with his students who were aged between 16 and 18 on the accident as there was no fitting memorial and asked if I would be interested in helping him.

When I received Jean Pierre's letter I was more than happy to help him but little did I know when I responded that it would result in such a wide-ranging research project. On behalf of Monsieur Garnier, I undertook to try to trace the relatives of all those who died.

First, I highlighted all the names in the Register of War Graves published by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and began by sending articles to those local papers where each crewman had his home, *RAF News*, and other like publications. By March 1996, I had traced the families of four of the crew: two sisters of the flight engineer, Flying Officer Alfred Enser; the sister of the pilot, Squadron Leader Charles Lancaster; three brothers of Corporal Burgess and their wives; the sisters and daughter of the navigator, Flight Lieutenant Keith Mooring, about whom the Editor of *After the Battle* had already received correspondence (see page 41 of issue 87) and, of course, my own father. Still to locate were the families of LAC John Burnett, Flight Lieutenant John Casey, and Flight Lieutenant Peter Chinn.

Meanwhile, Monsieur Garnier had visited the crash site several times with his students and recovered a variety of items which were prepared for display at Le Rivier. The exhibition was opened on January 26, 1996, and my husband and I visited it the following week and were very impressed.

I then invited all the relatives I had managed to trace to join my sister and I at Duxford to look over the Avro York MW232 being restored there by the Duxford Aviation Society. This reunion took place on April 3, 1996, and 20 relatives and ten of their friends met together for the first time. We were later joined by Jean Pierre Garnier with four teachers and some 25 students who had travelled from France.

Duxford Aviation Society members Doug Adamson and Ken Edney, both former RAF pilots who had flown Yorks, were in support of this memorable occasion, and Ken Hoddy (crew chief of the York restoration volunteers) showed us over the aircraft. Ken Edney marked the occasion by presenting a superb scale model of an Avro York he had made to the Society, so that visitors could see what the plane will look like when fully restored.

By now, plans were well advanced for us all to travel to France to unveil a commemorative plaque on the actual crash site and lay wreaths on the graves in the cemetery. At the same time, it was planned to formally open the museum created by the students in the village.

After further efforts, I had now traced the nephew of Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Ben Longridge and his wife, also Nicholas Newton Dunn, a great nephew. Just before our departure for France, I traced Cyril Clements. In 1945 he was a representative of the War Graves Commission based in Paris and he travelled to the village to make arrangements for the funeral (see page 18 of issue 39). Finally, the relatives of Peter Chinn — his brother Tony and his wife — had come forward following an appeal by Ed Stewart on BBC Radio 2.

On June 16, 1996, 34 of us travelled down to Le Rivier d'Allemont to participate in the proceedings which had been organised for us over many months.

Le Rivier d'Allemont — then and now. In 1944, this tiny village nestling in the mountains of south-eastern France was the unlikely setting for the death of a British air marshal. *Top:* **The funeral in 1945.** *Above:* **Fifty-one years after his body and that of his wife and crew were discovered in the melting snows, relatives and next of kin journeyed from Britain for a unique remembrance. Jean Paul Pallud, who guided us to the crash site in 1983, returned to take the photographs.**

Having read that the death of Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory in *After the Battle* No. 39 had occured not a million miles from his school in Briançon, Jean Pierre Garnier initiated a living history project for his students. Not only did he incorporate the circumstances of the final fatal flight into the Second World War synopsis but the crash site was fully investigated and the remaining artifacts brought down the mountain to be put on display in the village. *Left:* **In October 1995, Stéphane Cellier, Dominique Garcin, Yannick Piffaretti and Gérald Salla, students at the lycée, recover one of the remaining crankshafts.**

A fortuitous visit by the daughter of one of the crewmen to visit her father's grave in the local cemetery led to Jean Pierre making contact with Brenda Price. She threw herself wholeheartedly into trying to trace the families of all the crew with the idea of mounting a combined visit to Le Rivier to dedicate a commemorative plaque on the crash site. *Right:* **Two days before the unveiling, Jean Pierre took Brenda (left) and her sister Pam on a personal reconnaissance up the mountain. 'I just could not believe we had reached this point', said Brenda. 'It was beyond my wildest dreams.'**

For the actual ceremony, the French authorities had made helicopters available to airlift those relatives who were not able to manage the strenuous climb. In all, 34 family members had made the pilgrimage to France. In 1945, the funeral had taken place on June 15 — the ceremony in 1996 being held on June 19.

Before the ceremony planned for June 19, Jean Pierre very kindly joined a few of us at our hotel at 7 a.m. on the 17th with a view to visiting the crash site. It was quite an experience as the first part of the walk through the forest was very tiring. However, once we were out in the open, we gradually traversed along the mountainside. We had numerous stops to admire the wonderful views of the snow-capped mountains and wild flowers, and take in the clean fresh air. When we eventually reached the site where the plane crashed, I just could not believe we had reached this point; it was beyond my wildest dreams. My sister and I were able to savour this very special moment as we tried to imagine what it must have been like 52 years before in atrocious weather with very deep snow. To this day, there are still many pieces of the aircraft scattered around.

The return journey to the village seemed even more difficult so we cut across the mountain to make the descent easier. We finally reached Le Rivier feeling very tired but also exhilarated.

The ceremony on June 19 was truly memorable. We all assembled in the village at 9 a.m. Those relatives who wanted to walk to the crash site left early with members of staff and students from the school, also with representatives from the French Army who participated in the ceremony. The remainder of us waited until 11 a.m. when we were airlifted to the crash site by helicopter. I accompanied Jean Pierre and the Mayor of Allemont in the military helicopter while the relatives travelled in a civilian one. We had VIP treatment!

A plaque had been mounted on a suitable rock face by the French Army who provided a Guard of Honour. 'So many people took the time and trouble to make this ceremony such a memorable one', says Brenda. (Jean Paul Pallud)

Brenda unveiled the bronze plaque on behalf of the relatives whereupon two buglers heralded a minute's silence.

Wing Commander Stephen Gunner, Air Attaché at the British Embassy in Paris, his wife and Madame Claude Brunet (Inspector of the Academy) also travelled by the military helicopter.

The short trip was breathtaking, sweeping along the mountainside, and from the air we could see all the people assembled enjoying the scenery and taking a well-earned break after the climb to the site.

We eventually assembled for the ceremony near the rock to which the plaque had been fixed and on which the names of all the victims appeared. The Army was in position, two buglers standing high on a rock, and the relatives and friends of the victims gathered together. I had the privilege of unveiling the plaque on behalf of the relatives and Wing Commander Gunner very kindly read out all the names. There was then the sound of bugles followed by a minute's silence.

A speech was given by a representative of the Resistance in which he told us how grateful the French are for the help the British gave them during those dark years.

NOVEMBER 14th 1944
IN MEMORIAM
LADY DORIS JEAN LEIGH – MALLORY
AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR TRAFFORD LEIGH – MALLORY RAF
SQUADRON LEADER C.G.D. LANCASTER RAF
FLIGHT LIEUTENANT K.A. MOORING RAF
FLIGHT LIEUTENANT J.A. CASEY RAAF
FLIGHT LIEUTENANT P. CHINN RAF
FLYING OFFICER A.J. ENSER RAF
SERGEANT H.J. CHANDLER RAF
CORPORAL J.E.M. BURGESS RAF
LEADING AIRCRAFTMAN J.C. BURNETT RAF
GOD HAVE MERCY ON THEM ALL
LYCEE D'ALTITUDE DE BRIANCON 1995 – 1996

1945. With the remains of the crew not being discovered until after the war in Europe was over, none of Leigh-Mallory's contemporaries were present at the funeral *(right)*. **On the day in question, General Eisenhower was receiving a huge accolade in Paris before returning to the USA the following day and, of his three subordinate commanders for 'Overlord', two lay dead in France, Admiral Ramsey having been killed in an air crash in January 1945 (see** ***After the Battle*** **No. 87).**

After the ceremony, we returned to the village, either on foot or by helicopter, and later in the afternoon joined together again at the cemetery.

In the heat of the day, there was the gathering of the officials, speeches and finally the laying of wreaths after which the families placed posies of poppies on the graves of their loved ones. We again had the sound of bugles. This was a very moving scene. Fifty-two years previously the scene had been a military one; now it was for the families of the victims.

1996. Wing Commander Stephen Gunner, Air Attaché at the British Embassy in Paris, represented the RAF *(below)*.

On the final day, June 20, all the relatives assembled at the school to witness the York/Mallory exhibition being finally handed over to the village of Allemont as a permanent memorial. I am indebted to Jean Pierre, the staff and students of the school and everyone else concerned for this wonderful commemoration, and my sister and I hope to return so that we can renew our friendship with so many people.

The finale to all our efforts took place on Sunday, April 6, 1997 when Claude Pellissier, the son of Claude Pellissier Senior who recovered the tail wheel of the York in 1945 (see page 21 of issue 39), travelled to Britain with Monsieur Garnier and another party of his students, to present the wheel to the Duxford Aviation Society. It was a fitting venue for, as Tony Cottrell told the assembled audience 'the Air Marshal was in charge of No. 12 Group of Fighter Command in 1940, which included Duxford, and it was here that the 'Big Wing' concept originated'. The Leigh-Mallory tail wheel will be fitted to MW232 as a memorial in Great Britain to all those killed in the crash.

1997. Tony Cottrell: 'On behalf of the Duxford Aviation Society, I welcome our visitors from France, and the relatives of those who died in the tragic crash of Avro York MW126 in November 1944 while on a flight to Ceylon with Air Chief Marshal Leigh-Mallory and his wife on board. Brenda Price has done a wonderful job in inviting relatives of all but two of the crew to this ceremony. I pay respect to Jean Pierre Garnier, teacher of English at the high school at Briancon, for his idea for a project by his students to create a museum with relics from the crash site in the mountain above Le Rivier d'Allemont. Following a visit to Duxford a year ago, he suggested it would be appropriate that the Avro York that we are restoring should have the tail wheel from the crashed aircraft — and Claude Pellissier, whose father recovered the tail wheel from the mountainside, has agreed to donate the wheel to us. We are most grateful, as the tail wheel is original equipment, and our restoration team have aimed at rebuilding our York to its original condition. This gathering gives me the opportunity to compliment our 30 volunteers who have worked for many years in restoring our aircraft to an exceptionally high standard. While the tail wheel from the crashed York serves as a memento of MW126 in Britain, it is important to Duxford as a reminder of our history. As a reminder of the crash of MW126, Ken Edney, a DAS member and former York pilot, has made a plaque from a piece of MW126 recovered from the mountainside — and this has been fixed to the tail of our York.'

SIWA OASIS IN THE WESTERN DESERT

By David List

'Last time I was here', my companion remarked, looking down from the tomb-laden Jebel al-Mawta (the Hill of the Dead) at Siwa as the fire tender trundled past below us, 'all I could see was smoke and the frightened faces of the locals peering out from these tombs as we drove in from the desert'. 'The last time' was 1941 and for Richard Evans, then a driver in No. 346 Reserve MT Company, RASC, which ran the 'Siwa Train' truck resupply convoy for some months during that fateful year in World War II, it was an inopportune arrival during a raid by the Regia Aeronautica who had first struck at Siwa in two flights of six unidentified aircraft, three and a half hours apart, on October 18, 1940 when some 55 bombs were expended on waste ground without causing a single casualty or any damage.

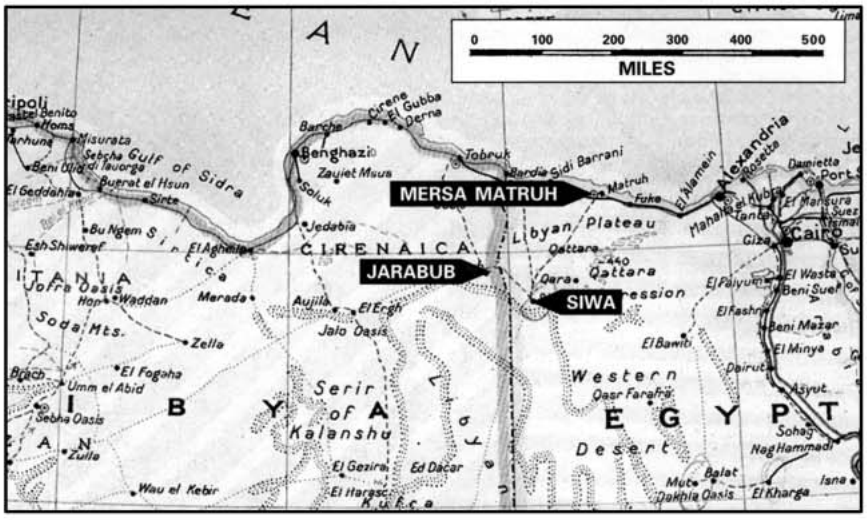
This time was November 1993 and once again a column of thick oily black smoke was pouring into the clear desert air of this legendary place once called Ammonium, to which the Greek historian Herodotus gave the name 'oasis' (probably from the Coptic word 'ouahe'; to dwell) and in so doing named every other haven of safety in the deserts of the world.

Siwa, at Latitude 29°12′12′′N Longitude 25°31′17′′E lies some 50 km from the modern border with Libya and 539 km west of the Nile at the same latitude in a trough-like depression about 22 metres below sea level. It extends for roughly 82 km and varies from 28 to 3 km in width and covers some 285-310 square kilometres. Temperatures recorded there range from a minimum in winter of 0°C, through a winter maximum of 22°C to a summer maximum of 47°C. In the surrounding desert, air temperature can reach over 50°C and at ground level over 80°C.

Top: **This general view of Siwa was taken from Jebel al-Mawta (the Hill of the Dead) in 1937 during a reconnaissance of the Quattara Depression and El Alamein area ordered by Major-General Percy Hobart when 'Hobo' commanded the Mobile Division, Egypt. From the collection of Brian Evans-Lombe, 8th Hussars, inventor of the EL sun compass. (IWM)**

Centre: **Comparison shot showing the smoke over Siwa and** *(above)* **an illicit picture of a piece of military equipment! Photographs like these can get innocent tourists acquainted with the inside of an Egyptian prison and a whole new way of life so don't take them unless you have a contingency plan for dealing with the consequences.**

In World War I, the oasis was a major transit and resupply point for the Sanusi confraternity in their jihad against the Italians, French and British and had to be captured in an operation quite remarkable for its day. In World War II, it had to be garrisoned initially to deny its use to the Italians as a forward base from which to mount an air offensive against the heart of the country. Then, when the first Italian offensive had been defeated and the fighting moved largely into the 'bulge' of Cyrenaica, it became primarily a logistics area and an operations base for the reconnaissance, intelligence and raiding sorties of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG); a dispatching point for agents of the SIS and the Interservice GSI(N) Section (responsible for the recovery of evaders and escapers); a rear base for the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Middle East Commandos; and also a signals intercept post and forward airstrip for RAF photo reconnaissance and strike missions, with a break of but five months when it was in Italian hands.



As an expedition, David List's journey across the Western Desert to Siwa was spectacular, but as a journey back into history, it was somewhat of a disappointment. Virtually nothing remains to be seen from the wartime period and, as David explains, photography was fraught with the risk of arrest. Meaningful comparison photographs are also difficult.

For many years, Siwa has been closed to visitors without a permit from Egyptian Military Intelligence, since it lies in a frontier zone where relations between the Libyan and Egyptian governments have reached flash point. A small border war broke out between the two countries in July 1977 resulting in the Egyptian air force flying retaliatory strike and electronic warfare suppression missions over Cyrenaica and as far south as Kufra, their armour crossing into Libyan territory near Sollum, fighting a successful, short, sharp armoured action before retiring, whilst at the same time Egyptian heliborne paratroops were airlifted in to the Jarabub area to destroy guerrilla training camps there. It would seem not unlikely that the heliborne troops either mounted out of, or staged through, Siwa during these missions and that a similar kind of deployment could be used in the future.

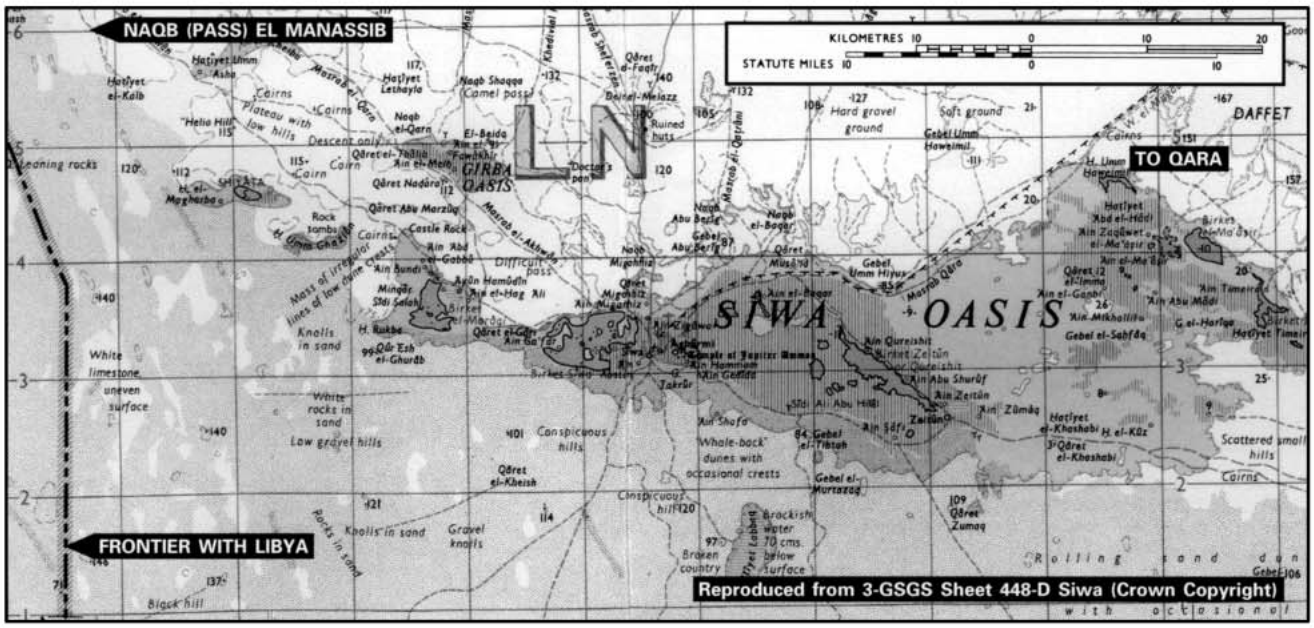
In 1993, however, the political climate had improved enough between the neighbours for the Egyptian Saharan oases to be visited with minimal paperwork by those foreigners with an inclination to do so. Even so, quietly purring out of the Qattara Depression, by way of Qara oasis, in a small tour group of four Toyota diesel Land Cruisers, led by an Egyptian Army colonel, took us past extensive military barracks with the crews of Russian-built M30 155mm artillery pieces at drill, and heavily weathered and battered T-62 tanks squatting in their park alongside the road lent point to the warning of exercising extreme care when taking photographs; and most especially not to take any military subjects. It also put a bit of a damper on a hoped-for comparison shot because the original appeared to have been taken right opposite the present-day base of the battle group sitting in Siwa.

The oasis may be open to foreigners, but the constant, small, motorised troop movements in and around the place made the life of the writer trying to get comparison photography rather fraught, whilst the presence of military installations throughout this and the nearby oasis of Girba made some impossible.

At one point, an innocently composed shot of the fire tender returning through the market square from dealing with the fire that had sparked memories, in just about the right position for the Italian AB 41 armoured car in the accompanying picture *(see page 40)* nearly ended in disaster. Just as the shutter clicked it became obvious that the cheerfully waving crew were all wearing Egyptian Army camouflage uniforms, that the tender belonged to the military, and it should not be photographed on pain of imprisonment!

Since the author would like the opportunity of returning to this desert, a discrete veil will be drawn as to how he got out of that one and also managed to exit gracefully from tea with the Siwan chief of police somewhat later in the day, minus only some spare photocopied photographs of Siwa in both World Wars for the policeman's scrapbook, and returned to his rather worried companions, telephoned, as a joke, by the Chief himself, informing them the writer had been placed under arrest!

Egypt had been occupied by the British since 1882 with a protectorate being declared in December 1914, the month after Britain declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Although Egypt achieved its independence in 1922, Britain reserved rights over four specific areas: the security of Imperial communications; defence; the protection of foreign interests and minorities, and the Sudan. Lord Allenby was the Special High Commissioner of Egypt from 1919, this picture being taken on a tour of Siwa in 1926 escorted by the Camel and Car Patrols of the Frontiers District Administration.



The comparison taken by David in November 1993 shows the same public square in Siwa although a preceding shot taken just before the bus pulled up landed him in hot water with the local police!

Growth and change has come to Siwa since the end of World War II. A good northward road to Mersa Matruh on the coast carries the regular bus service to Alexandria, while another provides routes to El Bawiti at Baharia oasis and then on southward to the oases of Farafra and Dakhla. In 1917, such comparatively easy access was far in the future. Siwa was not only a long, hard, seven-day camel ride away from any centres of civilisation, out of range and sight of the hard-pressed Royal Flying Corps and Australian Flying Corps squadrons, it was also in the heart of the 'bandit country' dominated by the Sanusi who were tying down some 35,000 sorely needed British troops from the forces of the Entente powers fighting the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. (Interestingly, as a yardstick of effort, give or take a thousand, this is the same number of ground troops as was available to the GOC in C, Middle East, for the entire defence of Egypt in 1940. Some 32,000 of these men were deployed on Operation 'Compass' with Lieutenant-General Dick O'Connor when his Western Desert Force smashed X Armata (the Italian 10th Army) in December 1940-February 1941.)

WORLD WAR I

On the outbreak of war against the Ottoman Empire on November 7, 1914, the Sanusi confraternity (an essentially austere Islamic missionary order) were already fighting the Italians, who had invaded Ottoman Libya on September 28, 1911, just as they were the French in Tunisia ever since 1902.

For 40 years the Grand Sanusi had been well disposed towards the British in Egypt, but, in 1915, apparently persuaded by Ottoman (and now also German) advisers that it was his duty to carry out jihad against the enemies of the Sultan-Caliph Mehmed V, who had had his suzerainty over Egypt terminated by the proclamation of a Protectorate under His Britannic Majesty, King George V; and that the Ottoman army, ably supported by Germany, would soon be across the Suez Canal, Sanusi muhafzia (retained fighters) began to cross into Egypt in large numbers, adding to the October 20 move of some 300 men into the camping ground previously established at Girba in September, one day's march west of Siwa, opposite the Egyptian Coastguard post there.

With the British concentrated and reinforced at Mersa Matruh by a composite force of Indian, South African, British and New Zealand troops now called the Western Frontier Force, the network of agents run by Western Desert Intelligence, quickly established that the Sanusi plan was to march some 6,000 men with artillery from Girba via Siwa to the Fayoum with the intention of raising the tribes there who were known to be disaffected with British rule.

However, by Christmas 1915, the Sanusi plans were in disarray, their forces severely mauled by the Western Frontier Force under Major-General A. Wallace in a number of actions, and at Agagia on Saturday, February 26, 1916, they lost Gaafar Pasha, their professional Ottoman General captured by 180 men of the Dorset Yeomanry, with tiny casualties, in a daring cavalry charge across open ground in the face of three Maxims and the rifle-fire of some 500 muhafzia.

By a combination of strict control of all food and supplies reaching the desert oases from the coast, together with constant patrolling by the Imperial and Bikanir Camel Corps, armoured cars and Light Car Patrols operating from a series of dug-in blockhouses, the British and Italians managed to limit the Sanusi offensive plans in the Western Desert, compelling them to fall back upon Siwa and the other deep desert oases beyond the effective reach of the British to maintain the viability of their forces.

On January 9, 1917, Captain Leo Royle, MC, RFC, possessing extensive knowledge of Siwa and the surrounding desert from having lived and worked there for many years, was ordered to report before the 14th to Mersa Matruh where he would be 'required to guide an armoured car reconnaissance through Qara oasis to the North-East into Siwa'. A reconnaissance he duly carried out between January 15-18 using the specially adapted Ford Model Ts of the Light Car Patrols together with officers and men drawn from their parent Light Armoured Car Brigade. Accompanying the patrol was an additional GHQ Intelligence officer, Major Charles Maclean, whose son, Fitzroy Maclean, was also to see service with the Special Air Service in the western desert and at Siwa in World War II.

On January 19, Brigadier-General H. W. Hodgson, commander of the 230 Brigade and Coastal Section, Western Frontier Force, whose HQ was at Sollum was ordered to report to GHQ as soon as possible. On the 22nd, Sir Archibald Murray, the British Commander-in-Chief, having been briefed on the latest intelligence and assessment of the 'going' for motor vehicles, collected by the patrols from the Light Armoured Car Brigade to within 64 km of Siwa, directed that a raid on the oasis to kill or capture the Grand Sanusi, Sayid Ahmad el Sharif, newly appointed Viceroy over North Africa by the Ottoman Caliph, was to be carried out as soon as possible by a column from Mersa Matruh under Hodgson's command.

The raid, as originally conceived, was to be carried out by a force of 185 men and 215 camels in each of four companies of the Imperial Camel Corps, 85 men and 86 camels in each of two companies of the Bikanir Camel Corps and 120 men and 30 vehicles in four light armoured motor batteries, with the object of capturing the Grand Sanusi and inflicting as much loss as possible on his followers without damaging anything 'of a sacred character' in Siwa or nearby Girba oasis.

However, on January 27, 1917, a report was received to the effect that the Grand Sanusi's cousin had advised the evacuation of Siwa as part of the negotiations for a cessation of hostilities and that the Grand Sanusi and his bodyguard were about to retire on Jarabub, the Sanusi Holy City.

With great promptitude and daring, the British planners decided to scrap their original force mix, which would not be ready for operations for at least three weeks, and reconfigured Hodgson's Column as an all-motorised force built around the Light Armoured Car Brigade of Major L. V. Owston, DSO, 3rd Dragoon Guards (consisting of Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Light Armoured Car Batteries, later renamed Light Armoured Motor Batteries); Nos. 4, 5 and 6 Light Car Patrols under Major Llewellyn Partridge; detachments from the Hong Kong & Singapore Battery, RGA, with a 9cm Krupp gun captured from the Sanusi; from the Royal Engineers Signal Service with six Ford cars, six Ford vans and six motorcycles; from the RAMC with two Studebaker and two Ford ambulances; and a logistic tail of 40 Ford vans and 20 Peerless lorries.

Soon after war was declared, the internal security of Egypt was put at risk by the Sanusi uprising, countered by the Allied Western Frontier Force which operated Rolls-Royce armoured cars in Light Armoured Car Patrols. This still from a film is believed to have been taken as one of their vehicles, without the full protective armoured machine gun turret, was leaving Mersa Matruh on February 1, 1917.

Men of the Light Car Patrols (LCPs) with their Model T Fords modified for desert patrol work at early morning ablutions on the approach march to Siwa. These vehicles had a specially fitted body giving extra tankage under the front seats and did 4-5 km per litre of fuel (about 14 miles to the gallon). To give an operational range of 322 km, and an endurance of three days, the cars were grouped into patrols of six vehicles, each with a three-man crew, although the full strength of an LCP was two officers, two sergeants, two corporals and 18 men. One-way communication with base was provided by pigeon. *Right:* **More frames from the film of Brigadier-General H. W. Hodgson's column. Two of the LCP Model T Fords with their outsize tyres are nearest the camera with Lewis guns stowed in protective scabbards. (IWM)**

Left: **Erection of a guyed mast for the six-man wireless detachment provided by 230 Brigade Signal Section, Royal Engineers Signal Service, travelling with the headquarters of the column. This scene may have been filmed during the action of February 3, 1917, and is probably about mid-day when the atmospherics for day-time communication in the desert are at their best. The column's sets had an effective range of 64 km. The Coastal Section of the Western Frontier Force at Mersa Matruh, 145 km away, could also, intermittently, hear their traffic, but could not get a message through to them, much to the frustration of GHQ! (IWM)** *Right:* **The modern-day equivalent. Communications mast being set-up on one of the Toyota Land Cruisers for the mid-day call. Unlike the operators of Hodgson's Column who were heard back at Mersa Matruh, the frequencies allocated by the Egyptian Army to David's party made failure to reach Cairo by voice most days, routine.**

The supply columns departed Mersa Matruh at 1100 hours on January 31 to prepare their forward dumps and at 0630 hours on Thursday, February 1, 1917, the newly assembled and innovative desert mechanised force of over 800 men and 100 vehicles, accompanied by a Capitano Caccia, the Italian military attaché to Sir Archibald Murray's headquarters, rolled out of Mersa Matruh at the start of its 321 km surprise strike at the apex of Sanusi power. Included within Hodgson's Column as its mailed fist were the 12 Rolls-Royce armoured cars of the three LAC batteries, with the 18 desertised Ford Model Ts of the Light Car Patrols, mounting Maxim or Lewis machine guns, in close attendance.

Three days later, on Saturday, February 3, 1917, having completed a forward reconnaissance of the route down the escarpment, consumed or made a dump of all the supplies on the Peerless lorries and returned them to their start point to replenish, the column shook out into an offensive formation of two detachments. A flank force headed south-west for the Naqb (Arabic for hole or pass) el-Manassib in order to block Sayid Ahmad el Sharif's most probable line of retreat and a coup de main force, guided by Leo Royle, made for an unguarded escarpment pass above Girba found to be passable for the two light car patrols and six Rolls-Royce armoured cars of the augmented light armoured car battery he was leading. Unlike most of the other passes down to Siwa, this one, like the nearby Shafarzan pass was without any anti-vehicle ditches or barriers to delay them.

Having descended the pass without interference, just after 1000 hours, the leading armoured cars 'bounced' the first of three muhafzia camps identified by Western Desert Intelligence. Unexpectedly it held, not a handful of dispirited fighters but around 400-500 muhafzia from what was probably the best of the Sanusi taburs: the 'Dardafi' predominantly armed with modern Mauser magazine rifles and drawn from the bedu Dorsa and Hassa tribes in Cyrenaica, together with a small number of ex-Egyptian Coastguard Service men and Turkish officers and NCOs who provided the crews for two mountain guns and two Maxim machine guns sited on the hills near the Akhwan pass and Girba.

Hoping, perhaps, to maintain the shock and momentum of their surprise appearance, the six leading armoured cars unwisely accelerated into the attack across what proved to be a stretch of sabaka or salt marsh. Before they could close with them, the muhafzia, although clearly shaken, withdrew some 2,000 metres from their winter camp onto a rocky ridge with some pre-dug trenches where the cars could not follow and a fire-fight between muhafzia, armoured cars and the dismounted crews of Nos. 4 and 5 Light Car Patrols with their Lewis guns began which was to last for the next 20 hours.

Within minutes, two of the Rolls-Royce armoured cars bellied in as the thin sabaka crust gave way under their weight, quickly followed by two more and all had to be got out under fire, but the only British casualties sustained throughout the action were three officers wounded.

With their supporting artillery detachment waiting for orders that never came, back with the logistic tail and the supply dump, the column found it could neither dislodge the muhafzia from their good, defensible position (although they could keep them pinned down and without access to water), nor outflank them because of the poor going, try as they would, nor could they mask the position and try to make good their objective in Siwa for fear of being cut off.

Quite what the Sanusi commander, Mohammed Saleh and his officers knew, or deduced about the British deployments and intentions is unknown, for as the light faded they continued their vigorous shelling, rifle and machine-gun fire against the British troops before them who answered only with judicious bursts of Lewis gun-fire on fixed lines, hoping that the muhafzia would not make determined efforts during the night to discover just how thin the screen of troops was before them. (In fact, at one point, there was only some 22 men of a light car patrol lying out within 450 metres of the Sanusi positions!)

When the moon went down at 0500 hours on February 4, 1917, the weary British troops heard four rounds from the only mountain gun still in action and several bursts of machine-gun fire followed by a silence punctuated by the crackle and flames of burning ammunition.

With the dawn, it was clear that this had been the signal for the muhafzia to abandon tents, heavy weapons, their draught camels and donkeys and all the ammunition they could not carry easily on the man to regroup at Shiyata, south-west of Girba under Sayid Ahmad el Sharif and Mohammed Saleh before retiring on Jarabub by way of the Manassib pass which they thought impassable for motor vehicles. There, on the 5th, like a supply convoy before them, they ran

The column of Rolls-Royce armoured cars racing down the pass into Girba. This Girba should not be confused with another place of the same name in Libya between Sidi Omar and Amseat which was the site of an action fought by the anti-tank guns and Hussar armoured cars and tanks of Combe Force against elements of the Italian Raggruppamento Maletti on June 16, 1940. (IWM)

The agwad (elders) of Siwa in their robes of honour being addressed by Brigadier-General Hodgson with his staff from the steps of the Merkaz on February 5, 1917. Note what appears to be the additional insurance of another sentry on the roof-top. David was only able to locate and authenticate the film from which this still was taken after his return from Siwa. For many years this, and other related film sequences, have been classed in Imperial War Museum records as of doubtful provenance because they show events that pre-date the arrival of Harold Jeapes, the 'official cinematographer' in the Middle East in April 1917. Only by finding the Column's own war diary in the Public Record Office and its entry for February 5, 1917 stating: 'the official cine operator being much in evidence' could it be conclusively established that the film is genuine although the identity of 'the official cine operator' on this occasion is, as yet, unknown.

into the deliberate ambush that had been laid there by the tremendous efforts of Captain C. G. Mangles, MC, of the 20th Hussars. He had managed to get his men into position as planned and was able to signal this news by radio to Column Headquarters at 1900 hours on the 3rd. Recoiling from this further shock, the Grand Sanusi and those of his followers who chose to stay with him struck off south into the desert where the British were unable to pursue them further due to the bad going.

At the Akhwan pass on the 4th, Brigadier-General Hodgson, knowing the ambush was set up but still fearing a counter-attack and intent on regaining the initiative, personally led one of the LAC batteries down the nearest track to Siwa but had to turn back after about 12.5 km of increasingly bad going convinced him that the prize he sought was beyond his personal reach.

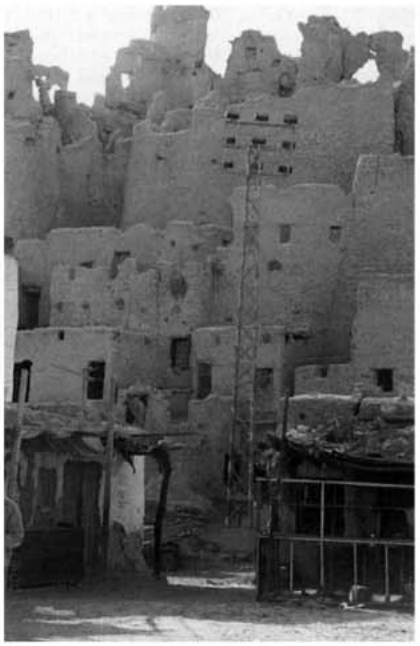
On the morning of Monday, February 5, 1917, now reinforced by the unloved Krupp gun brought to the oasis on two Wolseley tenders, with its ammunition transloaded onto a Talbot tender, due to the poor power-to-weight ratio of its portee compelling a tow by a Rolls-Royce waggon to the Shegga pass and then a portage onto the lighter vehicles in order to make any progress at all, the main body of Hodgson's Column advanced into Siwa town without further opposition and to a friendly reception from the few inhabitants who remained visible as the armoured cars arrived.

There, Leo Royle contacted the Siwan sheikhs and ordered them to surrender any remaining muhafzia, hand over Sanusi arms and ammunition still in their possession and to assemble at the Merkaz (court house or governor's residence) to hear their fate; something they subsequently did quite willingly because the Siwan sheikhs had been making conciliatory overtures to the British authorities as far back as March 1916.

Deeming the occasion one in need of suitable gravitas, Brigadier-General Hodgson ordered a nine-gun salute fired by the Krupp gun at half past ten before he addressed the Siwan agwad (elders) through Leo Royle acting as his interpreter, from the steps of the Merkaz, originally built after the subdual of fighting between the 'Shergyn' (Eastern) and 'Gharbyn' (Western) factions of the seven predominant Siwan families in 1827.

Hodgson had confidence that neither the Siwans themselves, nor the oasis itself, was now any threat to the British rear areas. In turn, by the actions of their people, which they knew had become known to the British, the agwad had every reason to believe that their break with the Sanusi and desire for peace would be accepted as genuine and that they would receive British protection from any future Sanusi retribution.

Hodgson's Column's coup d'état may not have seized or killed the Grand Sanusi as planned, but the 20 fresh burials and 100 discarded rifles found at the Akhwan position, together with later reports that five Turkish officers of nine engaged in the action were also casualties and the count of an additional 20 dead and 100 wounded resulting from all the Column's actions and the further reconnaissance by Captain Mangles as far as Melfa showed that the last Sanusi force within Egypt had been scattered and Sayid Ahmad el Sharif's credibility as a war leader had been destroyed.



Left: **The impressive 12 to 18-metre-high walls of al-Shali (the town) at Siwa built of kharsif: a salt-impregnated mud which dries like cement but dissolves with great rapidity when wet! Apparently photographed on February 5, 1917 by a member of Hodgson's Column and donated to the Imperial War Museum by V. S. Manley.** *Right:* **Over the last 70-odd years the weather has conspired with man to change the face of Siwa.**

With their objectives accomplished by audacity, accident and the incompetence of the enemy, Hodgson's Column withdrew to Mersa Matruh as quickly as it came, arriving there on February 8 having left behind more than one amazed muhafzia officer prisoner, kicked off the cars for lack of space and shortage of fuel and rations.

On March 28, 1917, a peace agreement was signed by the British, French and Italians and on April 14, 1917, Sayid Idris el Sanusi concurred with the terms which provided for a cessation of hostilities against the Entente powers, the disbandment of the Sanusi *zawiyas* (religious lodges) on Egyptian territory, the handover of all Italian prisoners still held by the Sanusi and a commitment to further negotiations with the Italians over the disputed sovereignty of Cyrenaica. By September 22, the Italians were subsidising Sayid Idris el Sanusi with 130,000 lire for his political support against the continued intransigence of his uncle and by November Leo Royle, now a qualified pilot and recently appointed Kaimakam (a third grade Civil Servant equivalent to lieutenant-colonel) or Governor of the Western Desert Province along with Captain Mervyn MacDonnell, originally a GHQ intelligence officer with the column, were involved in preparations to arm Sayid Idris el Sanusi in his battle for succession with Sayid Ahmad el Sharif!

With the Sanusi theocratic aspirations diffused by internecine rivalry and mechanised mobility for garrison and patrol operations proving effective, two brigades of infantry, two companies of the Imperial Camel Corps, an armoured car battery, a motor machine-gun company and an RE siege company were all released for operations against the Turks in the eastern desert: a considerable achievement for so small and untried a force as Hodgson's Column and one marked by the award of three Distinguished Service Orders, two Military Crosses, ten Military Medals and the Italian Argento Al Valore Militare (the equivalent of the British MC) for Captains MacDonnell and Royle.

Siwa Gate fort, the dug-in and wired compound established on the escarpment above Siwa to keep the troops healthy and clear of the infections prevalent there, was kept permanently manned until the end of World War I on a roulement basis by 100 all ranks drawn from a light armoured motor battery, a light car patrol, an infantry detachment with two machine guns and the usual ancillary services.

In 1918, Siwa itself, now under a British District Officer living in the oasis, with a half-section of 20 Frontier Districts Administration Camel Corps soldiers to keep the peace and control smuggling, reverted to its quiet obscurity and ancient fame as the site of an oracle with the Siwans themselves benefiting from their contact with the motorised troops from Siwa Gate fort by discovering the wheel. Local craftsmen took to repairing and copying wheels from the Ford Model T's they so frequently saw and fitted them to little carts that could be pulled by donkeys. Carts with the same wheel design can be seen to this day about the business of the oasis which is rich in olive, fig, date, pomegranate, peach, mulberry, carob, lime, grape and also the cultivation of barley and wheat, but not rice since this encourages mosquito and hence malaria.

To the annoyance of the Italians, who muttered darkly through diplomatic channels about 'aiding and abetting' cross-border smuggling, two British time-expired officers from the Frontier Districts Administration (FDA) set up in the tourist business by furnishing a rest-house at Siwa and providing motor transport between there and Sollum 257 km away for those who could afford it. For some 20 years, the oasis was out of the eye of history until it made a cameo appearance as an exotic background setting, complete with a new twist to the vanished army of Cambyses myth, for *Biggles flies South*, one of W. E. Johns' internationally best-selling Major Bigglesworth air adventure yarns first published in 1938. This had been inspired by the 1932 desert exploration flights of Squadron Leader H. W. G. J. Penderel, MC, AFC, of 'Two-Sixteen' Squadron, the main RAF bomber/transport unit in the Middle East, accompanied by, amongst others Laszlo Almasy, a Hungarian explorer who later operated the Abwehr's long-range desert reconnaissance and intelligence unit before finally ending up a British agent at the end of the coming world war.

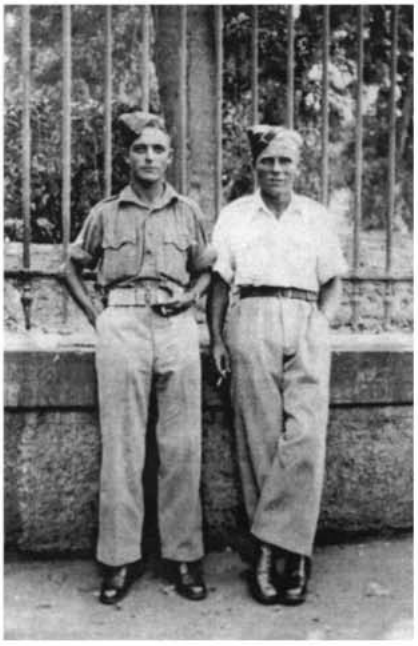
Across the border in Cyrenaica between the peace agreement of April 1917, the final humiliating departure of Sayid Ahmad el Sharif in an Austrian U-Boat in August, 1918, never to return, and 1922 (the year of the British recognition of Egypt as an independent sovereign state no longer under the British Protectorate), an uneasy peace, punctuated by sporadic violence, reigned with Sayid Idris el Sanusi now been received by the King of Italy and declared Emir with autonomy over Jedabaya, Aujila, Jalo, Kufra and Jarabub — this last oasis being ceded to Italy by Egypt in exchange for a frontier adjustment near Sollum to give undisputed control of the port by moving the border away from its dominating position on the high ground above it.

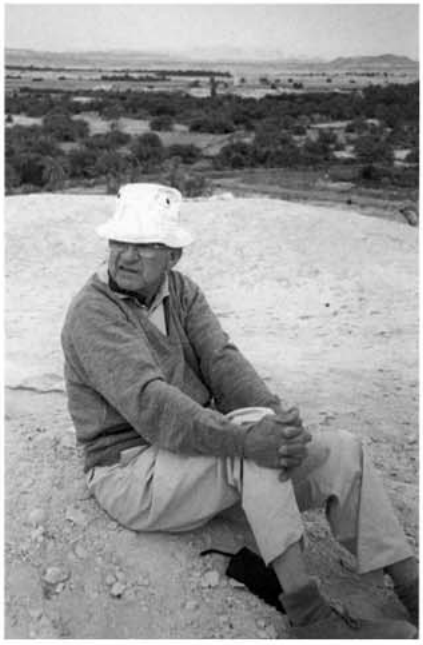
In March 1923, with the Sanusi making difficulties over disbanding their armed posts and dispersing their muhafzia and with Italy becoming a fascist state, the Italian authorities decided their solution to the Sanusi problem lay in the ruthless application of airpower and mechanised forces against the Sanusi adwar war bands, general food denial operations against them and their families, and a policy of immediate execution of all male prisoners deemed to be armed insurgents.

To back stop this policy, frontier control with Egypt was improved on the orders of Marchese di Neghelli Marshal Rodolfo Graziani and from April 1931 to February 1932, at cost of 20 million lire, the Italians constructed a 1.5-metre-high, 9-metre-wide barbed-wire barrier from the sea at Bardia to Jarabub 18.25 metres inside their territory, controlled by nine redoubts linked by telephone and patrolled by the Guardia alla Frontiera della Libia and aircraft from three airfields at Benghasi, Apollonia and Crum El Chel west of Tobruk. Much though it became derided as a folly in later years, it was an effective barrier and many Sanusi families and their livestock were slaughtered either side of the wire when trying to make a break for the safety of Egypt.

Italy's annexation of Abyssinia in 1936 forced the British and Egyptian authorities to reassess the defence of Egypt and on November 14, 1936, an Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of Alliance and Friendship, valid for 20 years, was ratified by the Egyptian government. In January 1937, a British Military Mission under Major-General J. Marshall-Cornwall, later succeeded by Major-General G. N. Macready, arrived in country to start the process of training and equipping the Egyptian Army according to British tactical doctrine and methods, whilst six Egyptian officers, the beginning of the Royal Egyptian Air Force, were already well on the way to becoming pilots under RAF instruction.

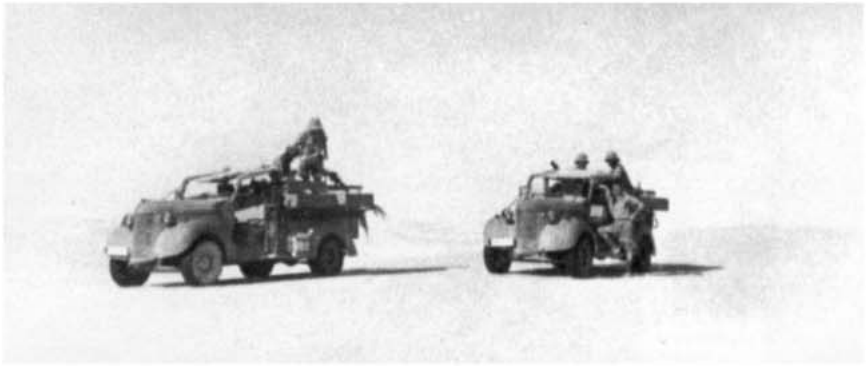
The entire British military commitment in Egypt prior to World War II was directed at the defence of the Suez Canal and the safeguarding of the lines of communication to India. Financial stringency and Egyptian national aspirations for self-government meant that deployment of the British troops anywhere in Egypt was strictly limited to the exercise areas defined by the 1936 Treaty within short distances of the canal and, although the RAF had the freedom of the Egyptian skies, no RAF aircraft was permitted within 10 km of the frontier with Italy's Libyan colony and any British ground reconnaissance of the frontier zone had to be done in civilian clothes and with the minimum of transport for fear of upsetting the Italians who possessed a superiority of 5 to 1 in aircraft and on the order of 2.3 to 1 in ground troops over the British garrison.





Journey back in time. *Left:* **Richard Evans of the Royal Army Service Corps (left) and a friend in Cairo's Ezbekiah Gardens in October 1942.** *Right:* **Richard back in the desert 50 years later, pictured here on the Hill of the Dead at Siwa.**

Back in 1941, Richard was a driver in No. 346 Reserve MT Company operating the 'Siwa Train' convoy. Then, the tombs or 'homes of eternity' on the hill — Jebel al-Mawta — were used as air raid shelters.



Two of the original four Chevrolet KC 0.68-tonne trucks modified for desert patrol work, each armed with pintle-mounted Lewis guns, used on the first Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) operation out of Siwa, August 10-16, 1940. All six New Zealanders on this operation took illicit cameras with them, later explaining, as their boss recorded some 22 years later, that 'British Army orders on photography in the western desert of Egypt could not possibly apply to New Zealanders touring in Italian Libya!' (via The Intelligence Corps Museum)

SECOND WORLD WAR

At midnight on June 10, 1940 when Italy went to war with Britain, but not Egypt as such, Siwa was already occupied by the 1st Light Car Regiment of the Egyptian Frontiers Force Brigade which had its regimental headquarters and two squadrons mounted in 0.68-tonne Ford trucks based there, alongside No. 2 Company of the Arab Legion still in the process of being embodied. On the suggestion of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, the GOC in C of British Troops Egypt (BTE), four old British Medium Mk IIA tanks, manned by Frontiers Force crews trained by RTR personnel, had recently been added to this force. A flight of Lysanders from the REAF No. 1 (Army Co-Operation) Squadron completed a garrison intended primarily for the patrol of the western frontier supported, in theory, by Egypt's Mobile Force under Prince Duad with its six Mk VIB tanks, truck-mounted infantry and light field and anti-tank artillery batteries based on Bahariya.

On June 11 and 12, 1940, Nos. 211 and 113 Squadrons, RAF, had their Blenheim's up successively on pre-planned visual and photo-reconnaissance missions over Siwa and the other oases just across the other side of the Egyptian frontier at the start of major efforts to build up the intelligence picture before the Italian began their expected offensive. This was the start of Siwa's second career as an advanced base for air and ground operations into Libya which was to continue until the British withdraw in the face of Rommel's last offensive in 1942.

On June 28, Gladiators of No. 33 Squadron, RAF, were ordered to position at Siwa in support of short-range air operations to commence on July 2 against Jarabub oasis.

Still worrying about his lack of good strategic intelligence on Italian preparations and intentions, General Sir Archibald Wavell, the GOC Middle East, now sanctioned a daring, Nelsonian, idea; a resurrection, in new guise, of the Light Car Patrol utilising the latest radio equipment, desert techniques and skill garnered in the inter-war years by expeditions led by Major Ralph Bagnold, a Royal Engineer signals officer in World War I, a first rate scientist (who was later to become a Fellow of the Royal Society) and now a 45-year-old major serving in the Royal Corps of Signals as GII(Liaison) in the office of the Signal Officer in Chief at GHQ Middle East.

On August 7, 1940, Pat Clayton, one of Bagnold's colleagues from pre-war desert exploration days, left Cairo as a newly-commissioned 45-year-old 2nd lieutenant, acting captain, in command of the first mission of the unit that was to find fame as the incomparable Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). Travelling in two modified Chevrolet KC 0.68-tonne trucks with six volunteers from the 2nd NZEF; — Hamilton, Croucher, Tinker, Spottswood, Elmslie and Curtis — plus Ali Said Fudail, an experienced desert driver and a friend of Clayton's from his days in the Survey of Egypt and borrowed from them for the purpose, Clayton made his way to Siwa via advance headquarters, Western Desert Force, at Maaten Bagush to see the Western Desert Force commander, Lieutenant-General Dick O'Connor.

At Siwa, where petrol had been predumped by BTE transport supposedly stocking the garrison, Kaimakam 'Tom' Bather, RTR, of the British Military Mission lent a Frontiers District Administration support section of seven Ford 0.68-tonne trucks with Sudanese crews under a keen Mulazim Awal (the Egyptian Army equivalent of lieutenant) to carry the replenishment of petrol they needed to give them the range out to the Jalo-Kufra track and Kufra area across the border in Libya.

On Saturday, August 10, 1940, the patrol departed southward from Siwa into the huge expanse of what is now called the Egyptian Sand Sea and by noon on August 11 were through this, dumped their spare petrol, and the FDA crews turned back on their tracks to Siwa.

Clayton had been specifically ordered not to let his support crew leave Egyptian territory, so, in his own words, at their request; 'he only took them about 25 kilometres across the frontier'! Kennedy Shaw, the Intelligence Officer of the LRDG (and of the SAS Brigade in North West Europe) later remarked that they thus '...may or may not have been the only Egyptian Army troops to operate in Italian territory during the war.'

Clayton and his men then proceeded to accomplish the first crossing ever attempted by a military force of the 225 km miles of immense sand dunes separating Egypt from Libya where the longitudinal or seif dunes along the line or parallel to the prevailing wind, may exceed 40 metres in height and 600 metres in width, then crossed a previously undiscovered second dune field of almost equal width (now known as the Kalashnu or Calansio Sand Sea), penetrated 322 km into enemy territory and remained there watching the Jalo-Kufra track round the clock for four days in an August temperature of 51°C (having had an 8 km walk into their OP to ensure no fresh, tell-tale tyre marks would be left behind them to alert the Italians to their presence). Recovering to Siwa by August as unobtrusively and expeditiously as they had come, they staged on to Cairo in time for lunch on the 19th using a fast route across the Qattara Depression which Pat Clayton and Ali Fudail knew well from survey work there some 12 years before having covered 2414 km.

At the end of August, General Staff Intelligence at GHQ Middle East warned that SIM (Servizio Informazione Militare: Italian Military Intelligence) was running agents into Siwa from Jarabub as they had tried to do in 1936 and on September 2 they believed the Italians intended a cross-desert raid on the Nile valley; perhaps an attack against Siwa itself and possibly the equipment of Uweinat as forward base. Two days later, from the office he shared with SIS, known by the cover name of the Inter-Services Liaison Department (ISLD) in GHQ, Ralph Bagnold issued the first operational orders for his entire unit to set up dumps along the Libyan frontier, to carry out reconnaissances around Kufra and to raid any enemy dumps at Uweinat.

Just as the size of the Light Car Patrols before them was dictated by logistics so was the composition of the new patrols. Bagnold reckoned the effective operational range of a patrol needed to be 2414 km and 20 days endurance. The minimum vehicle crew required to handle all desert tasks, especially 'unsticking' in soft sand was three men and the patrol itself needed to have at least one direct-fire weapon with a punch which could 'take down' with impunity a typical Italian desert fort, or an escorted vehicle convoy, from outside machine-gun range. From recent trials he knew that the 1.36-tonne Chevrolets could carry a maximum load of 1586 kg and used an average of 2.6 litres of fuel per km. At the range he wanted, this meant carrying at least 816 kg of fuel before considering anything else. With rations, water, weapons, ammunition, a long-range radio, personnel and their own kit added in, this gave a patrol of ten trucks plus a lighter, non self-supporting pilot car, for route-finding, scouting, etc. Although the patrols were to operate from Cairo to preserve secrecy, Siwa provided a handy place where fuel could be pre-positioned unobtrusively for them by BTE, despite the reluctance of that command's logistics commander to send his trucks there 'for fear they might get lost'! (This despite the fact that the RAF had been sending refuel and arming parties to Siwa since 1917.)

The Toyota Land Cruiser 'column' on their way to Siwa.

Natural landmarks are few and far between in the Great Sand Sea and Sakhret el Ahmud or Pillar Rock is an excellent prominent mark about 30 kilometres from Ain Dalla. Size in the Sahara is strictly relative as can be seen from the vehicles parked a short distance away. David explains that the pillar is about twice the height of a man and, to judge by the patina of droppings on its upper surfaces, is frequently used by resting falcons and other birds.

On September 5, 1940, Ralph Bagnold, his small HQ and all three long range patrols armed with two 37mm Bofors guns left Cairo heading south of the Qattara Depression and avoiding Bahariya oasis. T and R Patrols then split off for Siwa whilst W and HQ proceeded to Ain Dalla. At Siwa some of the trucks from both patrols ran into the oasis like any other convoy to uplift 29520 litres of fuel in 820 x 36-litre cases which they then ferried to a new dump at Big Cairn (whose size is relative, being only 1.5 metres high) ensuring that they were not under observation whilst so doing. In the meantime, Ford/Marmon Herringtons were trans-shipping yet more fuel from Wadi Halfa to another dump in the Gilf Kebir ready for the returning patrols. R, T, W and HQ now all met up at Big Cairn having been taught basic desert mobility skills by experts and on September 13 they heard by radio that the Italian offensive had begun.

On September 15, T and W Patrols started their own offensive into Libya. On the 19th, HQ BTE appreciated that an Italian land attack on Siwa was imminent and the Egyptian Army completed their move of 9.4 cm howitzers into the oasis. Five days later, whilst W Patrol was busily intercepting the regular Kufra supply convoy, the RAF deployed a detachment of two Lysanders from No. 208 Squadron based at Qasaba (Latitude 31°10′N Longitude 27°28′E) to Siwa to keep a weather eye on Jarabub as advance reconnaissance for the RAF strike force. General Wilson made a quick visit to reassess the defences because political moves were also afoot to withdraw the 1st Light Car Regiment from the frontier as the Regia Aeronautica had recently hit one of their squadron headquarters.

Siwa's connection with military aviation dated back to the creation of its first advance landing ground (ALG) there in March 1917. A very basic strip of 868 x 640 metres known as Siwa North Landing Ground at Latitude 29°22′N Longitude 25°31′E was in use there from the 1930s and a second site of 658 x 475 metres was also earmarked for development as Siwa Town Landing Ground at Latitude 29°11′N Longitude 25°30′E but no action was taken on this until after war broke out. Both sites were re-named, Siwa North initially as LG 18 (later LG 66) and Siwa Town, when it became operational, as LG 67 when RAF Middle East went over to code numbers rather than geographic place names for all their airstrips as a security measure.

Following 'Jumbo' Wilson's visit of September 20, Captain J. F. C. Mellor's C Company and the carrier platoon of the 1st KRRC, with a section of D Battery, 3rd RHA, all from the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division, were despatched to 'give general encouragement and stiffen the Egyptian troops' in Siwa on the 23rd, coming under command of Bimbashi Abdel Bari and thereafter a steady stream of No. 202 Group, RAF operations began to stage through or from Siwa with the REAF Lysanders having been withdrawn, again for political reasons.

Sigint detected Italian preparations for two columns of 150 trucks, six tanks and some one to two thousand camels carrying a maximum of 520 tonnes to proceed to Jarabub from Jedabaya and Bardia, possibly preparatory to the predicted attack on Siwa. The columns were caught on the march and badly mauled by Nos. 211 and 55 Squadrons having been spotted by the Lysanders of No. 208 Squadron, and were seen to disperse in disarray with both air forces losing one aircraft in a fight with the limited Italian top cover.

On October 3, General Wavell, now C in C, Middle East, also flew into and out of Siwa on the same day in a No. 208 Squadron Lysander as he started his preparations for what became Operation 'Compass'. On October 15, Pilot Officer David Druce and Sergeant John Muldowney of No. 208 Squadron were shot down and killed in Lysander L4714 as they returned from a reconnaissance over Jarabub.

October 22 saw Ridotta Maddalena (Latitude 30°53′N Longitude 24°59′E) attacked by two No. 55 Squadron Blenheims to deny the Regia Aeronautica the use of Bir Shegga LG for air attack on Siwa during the day's visit there by the Right Honourable Anthony Eden, MC, MP, the British Secretary of State for War, who, together with 'Jumbo' Wilson and a small entourage was flown the round trip into Siwa North LG in the back of No. 208 Squadron Lysanders with a close fighter escort of three Gladiators provided by No. 112 Squadron.

Besides taking the opportunity to visit the KRRC company in the oasis (since he had won the MC with this regiment in World War I) Eden was seeing for himself why the Egyptian Army officers of the Frontier Force garrison of this politically sensitive area were deemed unreliable at a time when it was still envisaged that the enemy were intending to capture Siwa and was also listening to proposals for its defence as plans were being laid for the British to go on the offensive.

Siwa seen in 1942 with some of the vehicles of the Heavy Section of the LRDG. They drew supplies for the Group's detached squadron operating out of Siwa from No. 2 Field Supply Depot at the Mersa Matruh railhead. On the left are two ex-Italian Army Lancia 3RO with sheeted loads. In the foreground and middle distance are strake-bodied White 920Ds together with two Indian Pattern body Chevrolet 1311X3, with a Ford 01C/09C V8 pilot car on the right. The White 920D were originally acquired from No. 286 Special Line of Communication (Railhead) Company, RASC, in December 1940 because each truck could carry one complete replenishment of petrol in cans for an 11-truck patrol to give them a range of 2414 km. (Dick Lawson)

West of Ain Dalla, the predominant seif (Arabic for sword) dunes of the Egyptian Sand Sea can be up to 91 metres high, 20 km wide and 20 km long. Waiting at the foot of a typical dune in the left foreground is one of the 20 Chevrolet C60L of the LRDG Heavy Section which replaced the White 960D and, right, a Chevrolet 1311X3 with covered Vickers GO machine gun and distinctive Aero screens. On the crest is the mobile Medical Inspection Room, Mk I, used by Dr Dick Lawson, the LRDG's Medical Officer, alongside two patrol Chevrolet 1533X2 displaying the stores hump and pintle weapon mountings characteristic of operationally-loaded vehicles. (Dick Lawson)

Back in Cairo, the GHQ operations staff briefly explored the possibility of using the unrivalled desert mobility, communications and fire-power of Major Bagnold's hardy New Zealand long range patrols as a rapid reaction force to augment the troops in Siwa but this idea was quickly discarded as an impractical and unnecessary misuse of this valuable unit.

For reasons that are still unexplained, by November 2, SIM were commenting: 'It is reported the British have forced Egypt to use her irregular desert troops in advance areas and that 5,000 have therefore been sent to Siwa.' This is probably why Siwa was never seriously troubled again until the arrival of the Germans, apart from raids by up to 21 SM 79s and strafing by six CR 42s on November 7 and 18. Their total result in the first strike was one Lysander burnt out, another slightly damaged and four Siwans killed. The No. 208 Squadron detachment pulled out on November 11 and the second strike caused no damage at all.

With the Western Desert Force reaching the limit of its advance on February 9, 1941, Siwa supported the predominantly Australian ground forces which took Jarabub on March 21 after the garrison, under Tenente Colonello Salvatore Castagna, had put up a spirited resistance. For the first time, the Regia Aeronautica showed up well, flying a total 26 SM 82 and six SM 79 missions out of the field at Tamet to airdrop stores for the men holding out in the desperate hope of an Italian revival from their all-encompassing defeat. Some of the first air casevac missions of the desert war were flown by Valentias of No. 216 Squadron into Mersa Matruh from the airstrips at Siwa which now reverted to a training area for newly-arrived Commonwealth formations as the bulk of the British and Commonwealth forces were redeployed to Greece.

The arrival of the Deutsches Afrika-Korps quickly put Siwa back in the forward area as Oberstleutnant Gustav Ponath's men captured the commanders of BTE and the newly formed Cyrenaica Command — Lieutenant-Generals Dick O'Connor and Philip Neame near Mechili, the so-called 'navel of Cyrenaica', on April 7, 1941 — and forced the British to retreat in disarray, losing men, equipment, another general and vital fuel equivalent to three days supply for an entire division. So it was that on Easter Sunday, April 13, the very weary men of the recently formed Y (Yeomanry) Patrol and the experienced G (Guards) Patrol now forming A Squadron, the Long Range Desert Group under Major E. C. Mitford, RTR, drove their depleted complement of equally new, and heartily disliked, Ford F 30 1.36-tonne 4 x 4s into Siwa to join the Egyptian Army Frontier Force garrison and set up a watch on the Jarabub approaches.

From May 23, the Regia Aeronautica started to take an interest in the oasis once again with an SM 79, sometimes a Cant Z1007 with recce crews drawn from Nos. 173, 175 and 176 Squadriglie de Ricognizione Strategica Terrestre (Land Strategic Reconnaissance Squadrons) flying over on reconnaissance, invariably bombing and machine-gunning indiscriminately without causing any damage, although Siwans and some service personnel were often wounded.

Bottoming out at speed from the foot of a dune in the Egyptian Sand Sea.

Left: **The start of it all. Working to 'unstick' a bogged 3.63-tonne 6 x 6 Ford/Marmon Herrington transporting cased petrol from Cairo to the dump at Ain Dalla in 1940. (via Ralph Bagnold)**

Right: **Time marches on . . . vehicles may benefit from modern technology . . . are air conditioned . . . but, when crossing the desert, nothing changes.**

Left: **New Zealander Captain Claude Williams, MC, 1/1st Pembroke Yeomanry, commander of No. 5 LCP who surveyed the area around Siwa and ventured up as far as Benghasi. His name is still marked on the maps of Egypt to this day, viz Williams Pass. He was the first to report what is now known as the Qattara Depression. Ten years later his unusual, and disbelieved, war-time observations of operating below sea-level were confirmed by the Survey of Egypt. (National Army Museum)** *Right:* **Following in Williams' tracks, David List, ex-Special Forces NCO, in a clever self-portrait. All done with mirrors!**

Between June 10 and the end of August, G, Y and the composite H Patrol (made up from men of both patrols due to vehicle losses) ran 13 missions out of Siwa inserting men (usually drawn from the Libyan Arab Force) into enemy territory and general reconnaissance, together with a successful recovery of a downed pilot. On one of these jobs in July, two troops of G Patrol, under Captain Michael Crichton-Stuart, took with them an American liaison officer, Major David Lair, the only US Army officer ever to work with the LRDG. Simultaneously, Captain Pat McCraith was on another operation with Captain V. D. de Taranto of the 4th Libyan Arab Force Battalion; the first of many ISLD agents to follow.

In July, the Egyptian Army was finally relieved of its defensive duties in Siwa by units of the 1st South African Division who then shared its defence with the 4th Indian Division at Jarabub, together making up a brigade-sized formation known as Oasis Group. Detecting the changeover in progress, at noon on July 14, five SM 79s, escorted by 11 G 50 fighters dropped large numbers of small HE and incendiary on Siwa, followed by another raid by five SM 79s on July 16. On neither occasion was there any material damage, although, once again there were some Siwan casualties.

With the British turning to the offensive again, Field Supply Depot/Field Ammunition Depot 36 was established at Siwa from August 7 although it was moved out to Williams Pass at the beginning of the following month. FSD/FAD 40, to hold 30 days' supply of all ammunition natures, was planned for the Siwa-Jarabub area but was actually set up with the help of Siwan labour at Jarabub, guarded by the 1st Royal Sussex from the 4th Indian Division. Collectively, the entire area became known as No. 3 Forward Base. Logistic units attached to Oasis Group were also used to establish a new desert airfield, called LG 125, 144 km west of Giarabub which was stocked by Nos. 33 and 113 Squadrons.

In amongst the real dumps, additional fake ones and 52 static M3 Honey tank dummies, made up of sailcloth on a wire frame, known as the 38th RTR, with animation provided by two officers and 75 men of the 1st Welch under Captain W. S. Addiscott, were set up in and around Siwa in order to form an armoured threat to the enemy right flank by the simulation of an armoured regiment from an armoured division. The deception was gradually extended out to Jarabub with F RTR also providing truck-mounted dummy A13s manned by 'unhorsed' 7th RTR crews until their truck chassis were taken away to refit the transport units of the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade.

Above: **A desert mystery west of Ain Dalla. Like the 1.36-tonne 1940 Model WB, 4 x 2 Chevrolet W8 *Waikaha*, recovered by the Long Range Desert Group Association from south of Dakhla oasis in December 1983 (see *After the Battle* No. 44), this bogged-in 1.36-tonne 1940 4 x 4 Ford F30 L4406114 appears to have served with the LRDG at one time. It has the stripped No. 12 cab, sand-channel brackets, body-well weapon pedestal and a WD number within the serial range of vehicles allocated to the LRDG in February 1941. However, there is no record of any such vehicle being lost by them near Ain Dalla and the presence of fittings for a canvas tilt suggest the truck has been abandoned whilst on charge to another unit after the LRDG re-equipped with the new Chevrolet 1533X2 in February-April 1942. Compare with the F30s paraded by the newly-raised Rhodesian S Patrol at the Citadel Barracks, Cairo, on August 14, 1941 *(below)*. Twenty-three of the 31 men of the revised 'half-size' patrol were present on this parade held before they left to join A Squadron at Siwa. Corporal Laurence Ashby and Private Reginald Riggs, both originally enlisted in the 1st Buffs, were subsequently killed with S2 Patrol on December 22 when two Beaufighters of No. 272 Squadron shot up their patrol newly returned from recovering a five-man SAS section which had successfully raided Agedabia airfield.**

Major John Haseldon, MC, alongside a Lysander on one of the landing grounds at Siwa. The Shali, or old town, can be seen behind the LRDG Ford 01C/09C pilot car. Haseldon, who became a specialist desert intelligence officer in Military Mission 102, (which was raised by G(R) with Secret Service funds for 'irregular' operations using indiginous personnel), was originally a cotton broker from Minah in Upper Egypt. The son of an English father and a Greek mother, who could pass for a Bedouin when operating behind enemy lines, he was inserted by T2 Patrol of the LRDG, with three other G(R) officers tasked to attack the headquarters of the 101st Trieste Division at Slonta, he was waiting on the beach at 0900 hours on November 14, 1941, to guide the men of No. 11 Commando on Operation 'Flipper'; the raid to kill Erwin Rommel, when *Torbay* and *Talisman*, the two T Class submarines transporting the commandos, surfaced off the Libyan coast in atrocious weather. Both raids were abortive due to faulty target intelligence. (Dick Lawson)

Sequence showing the same airfield at Siwa shortly after its occupation by an Italo-German force in July 1942. (Bundesarchiv)

Simulated communications for the fake armoured units was provided by a squadron from 'Phantom', the GHQ Liaison Regiment, and was maintained by them until November 19, 1941, two days after the commencement of Operation 'Crusader'. Further electronic warfare measures were also undertaken by No. 2 Special Wireless Group, the Sigint unit of British Eighth Army, who installed a static direction finding station in Siwa under 2nd Lieutenant Donald Shirreff with land-line and radio links back to their intercept control station and Eighth Army headquarters at Maaten Bagush. A No. 11 set was borrowed from the LRDG for this purpose. This station, like the rest of the chain based on Mersa Matruh, remained at Siwa (with a short break in January-February 1942) obtaining good results until the British retired for the last time in 1942.

The nose badge is that of IV/KG zbv 1 (IV Gruppe of Kampfgeschwader zur besonderen verwendung 1 — IV Wing of Bomber Group for special employment) recently arrived from Russia.

Destination Siwa — then and now. *Left:* **This signpost is at a coastal track junction where Siwa is either 122 km or 154 km away, depending on the route. (Bundesarchiv)** *Right:* **Today, marker cairns help navigation in the desert.**

From the end of August, 1941, as the LRDG doubled in size and halved the number of vehicles per patrol, A Squadron, LRDG, in Siwa was reconstituted with New Zealanders in T and R Patrols commanded by Major D. G. Steele, NZMF, with a new Rhodesian S Patrol to follow. Bagnold, promoted to a full colonel at GHQ (and later to become head of the Deception Branch there) handed over command to Lieutenant-Colonel G. L. Prendergast, RTR, his second in command. (In late 1944, also as a full colonel, he was to become deputy commander of the SAS Brigade.)

Between then and the start of the November 1941 offensive, the squadron carried out 12 more reconnaissance operations and some more agent drops including two officers from the Libyan Arab force (LAF) Lieutenant J. M. Caneri and Captain J. E. Haseldon, now working for GHQ's G(R for Raiding) Branch. Both were later decorated for their work. (Jean Caneri went on to become the second in command of Popski's Private Army and John Haseldon was killed as a lieutenant-colonel, Intelligence Corps, in September 1942 on Operation 'Agreement', in command of the commandos raiding Tobruk.)

Bad weather at the end of October and the beginning of November 1941 kept the Italian and German photo reconnaissance away until a Ju 88 of 1(F)/121 managed to cover Siwa on November 25, but Sigint kept busy Capitano Guiglia's radiotelegrafisti company and the German radio interceptors of the 3. Kompanie of Nachrichten-Abteilung 56 under Hauptmann Alfred Seebohm. The latter made steady progress in identifying the units of Oasis Group and was able to report to the intercept control station in Berlin that dummy AA had been issued to Oasis Group, although, as far as is known, this small whiff of deception was never followed up.

From Ultra the British were aware that the Abwehr were taking a strong interest in the Siwa-Bahariya area. What was not known until later was that Abwehr I H West, although ultimately frustrated in all their designs, was planning an agent insertion programme and had recruited Laslo Almasy as a desert specialist to help them do it.

On November 20, with the weather still bad, Advance Headquarters Eighth Army received a long signal from the LRDG which had ten of its patrols deployed from Siwa on Operation 'Crusader' taskings. In part it read: '1900 hrs From Easonsmith ptl at 1830 GMT. Stirling, Lewis [sic], 19 others picked up'.

A headquarters section and two troops of the phantom Special Air Service Brigade created by the Middle East deception planners had just parachuted into tangible action for the first time. Captain David Stirling's No. 1 Special Service Unit, Middle East (now named L Detachment, following on from an existing K Detachment already operating dummy gliders and aircraft), had jumped in from Bombays of 'Two-Sixteen' Squadron on the night of November 16/17, to destroy enemy aircraft on Tmimi and Gazala No. 1 and No. 2 airfields in an attempt to suppress German tactical airpower at the start of Operation 'Crusader'.

In this object they failed; as did the men of No. 11 Commando attempting to decapitate the German command structure in North Africa by killing General der Panzertruppen Erwin Rommel.

For this operation, L Detachment had fielded 60 men; 55 dropping from five aircraft mounting out of Maaten Bagush, the remainder forming a base party in two 0.68-tonne Bedfords under Lieutenant Bill Fraser. Carrying six days' water and rations, his party departed from Siwa on November 17 with Lieutenant 'Jake' Easonsmith's R1 Patrol to set up two RV within walking distance of each other. R1 were to man their RV between 0600-0700 GMT on D+3 of 'Crusader' ready to pick up the returning troops and bring them back to their trucks which would then take them to Jarabub.

In the event of the paratroops failing to show within the appointed time, R1 had to depart but would leave enough rations and water to enable the men to get themselves to their own trucks which would be waiting for them at the second RV until D+8.

Due to storm-force winds, only three officers and 18 men, minus all their equipment lost in the containers in the drop made it to the waiting LRDG and back to Fraser's trucks. With nothing to show for the loss of 34 men and one scarce transport aircraft, this could have been the end of the embryonic SAS. Instead it was the start of a raiding partnership between the LRDG and the wearers of the 'winged dagger' in the Mediterranean that would last to the end of the war when both units were disbanded proudly wearing the beige beret and the unique parachutist qualification wings designed by Lieutenant 'Jock' Lewes.

The suppression mission that L Detachment failed to achieve was tackled, in the conventional way and with mixed success, by RAF and a SAAF squadron operating out of LG 125 and elsewhere. By December 1941, the RAF (but not the LRDG 'airforce' of two Waco communications aircraft) had ceased to operate out of Siwa as such with only transport and supply missions being flown for the garrison, the LRDG and other raiding or intelligence units based on the oasis.

During this month, the LRDG lost a man killed in the oasis plus two of their Rhodesians shot up by the RAF in separate 'friendly fire' incidents.

Arrival of the Italian garrison for Siwa in July 1942 photographed by a Panzer-Armee Afrika Propaganda-Kompanie photographer in the centre of Siwa. This may be part of the Monferrato Nuclei Exploranti Mobile (Mobile Reconnaissance Group) which was identified by General Staff Intelligence (GSI) staff at GHQ Middle East, as comprising a mixed squadron group of Italian Autoblindata 41 armoured cars with 75/18 self-propelled guns. (Bundesarchiv)

The isolated position of Siwa made it vulnerable against a surprise parachute attack and when German Fallschirmjäger arrived in North Africa at the height of Rommel's offensive, it was decided to give up the oasis without a fight — much to the chagrin of the Egyptians. A joint Italo-German force occupied Siwa without bloodshed on July 23, 1942. Here a Fiat SPA rolls into the oasis. (Bundesarchiv)

On December 30, two sections of L Detachment with T2 Patrol suffered yet another grievous loss when Lieutenant 'Jock' Lewes, David Stirling's second in command died of wounds received during a low-level fighter attack. The same fate later befell the officer who was to replace him. Lieutenant Robin Gurdon, who was due to transfer to the SAS from the LRDG, also died of wounds received from a fighter attack against G2 Patrol on July 13, 1942. Both officers were buried by their men but neither grave was subsequently relocated and so they are commemorated together on the El Alamein Memorial.

HQ LRDG and L Detachment moved up to Jalo for raiding operations but by February 1 had returned to Siwa as the swift German riposte dislocated British plans. From December 1941 through to June 27, 1942, when the orders were given to evacuate Siwa and its neighbour Jarabub at the height of Rommel's last offensive, the oasis saw the departure of another 47 LRDG missions; the arrival of Indian Long Range Squadron patrols and A, later C Squadrons of the Middle East Commando (subsequently renamed the 1st Special Service Regiment) all of whom also mounted their own operations from Siwa.

Most of the raiding activities, under the name of Operation 'Green Room', were intended to pave the way for a projected Eighth Army offensive, code-named 'Buckshot', but Unternehmen 'Aida', the Axis operation for the conquest of Egypt beat this to the punch. Jalo, Jarabub and Siwa were regularly monitored by, amongst others, the photo reconnaissance Cant Z1007bis of No. 191 Squadriglia de Ricognizione Strategica Terrestre on offensive reconnaissance out of Derna and the British authorities continued to worry that Siwa would be subject to a surprise parachute assault or some form of counter-raiding.

They worried even more when they started to detect the arrival of gliders in North Africa as well as elements of Major Jakob Burkhardt's Fallschirmjäger-Lehr-Bataillon who were trained to jump from He 111s. In fact, although the Axis command in North Africa wanted Jarabub and Siwa captured as soon as possible, they considered these places as minor problems and were not prepared to allocate troops or aircraft to the task until after the operation Unternehmen 'Theseus' was launched against the main British positions.

The presence of transport indicative of a brigade-strength force in the Jarabub area also appears to have put them off pending the release of sufficient troops or tactical aviation from the main effort near the coast.

As in 1941, this 'force' was a deception with dummy trucks and fake AA positions manned by the Free French under the name of the 'Lion Brigade'. On May 29, in Operation 'Glamour', the three 'battalions' of this deception unit, guided by a Rhodesian LRDG patrol, were ordered to simulate an advance on Jalo in an effort to divert some of the air support for 'Theseus'. This they did, attracting some sorties onto themselves and then pulled back to Siwa in time to join in the general evacuation of the base which the British had decided not to defend.

On July 23, Siwa saw the arrival of the biggest airlift in its history to date. Thirty Ju 52s carrying Italian troops, the first wave escorted by 19 Bf 110s of III/ZG 26 led by Hauptmann Herzberg, arrived overhead and proceeded to land and link up with Major Jakob Burkhard's 50-man Fallschirmjäger-Kampfgruppe who had driven in from Jalo and reported the British gone. Gone they may have been but through Ultra they knew that 423 soldiers, 23 tonnes of Italian equipment, five tonnes of aviation fuel and half a tonne of oil had been landed. From the same source, they also knew that one Ju 52 had crashed, that two other Ju 52s and a Bf 110 were delayed there through engine trouble and that a 3.7cm flak platoon was to be flown in by another three Ju 52s and six Italian transport aircraft.

The loss of this major oasis with its over 3,000 inhabitants came as a severe shock to the Egyptians and there was unrest in Cairo as a result. Had the place been fought over, the inevitable casualties to Egyptian nationals might have caused a political firestorm at a time when all seemed blackest for the British in Egypt.

Sigint and photo reconnaissance flown by the Baltimores of No. 1437 Strategic Reconnaissance Flight from LG 100 soon confirmed that Siwa had been occupied by elements of Generale di Brigata Commandante Ismaele Di Nisio's Divisione Corazzata Giovani Fascisti (136a) newly arrived in the theatre, with the airstrips at Siwa taken over by a flight of Ca 310s or Ca 309s from 12th Squadriglia Aviazone Presidio Coloniale and the occasional Ju 87. To British relief, the oasis now relapsed into torpor.

General der Flieger Otto von Waldau, the German air commander, and an Oberst Witt overflew the new acquisition on August 8 and pronounced the airstrips unsuitable for the Luftwaffe. Siwa Town LG they considered operable by CR 42s, but only if the runway was extended. Siwa North LG was noted as outside the security zone set up by the single resident Italian battalion and therefore also deemed unusable on a permanent basis!

In the meantime, the British prepared a contingency plan to regain the oasis employing the LRDG, an air-landing by L Detachment and two squadrons of Honey tanks in Operation 'Hoopoe' but this was shelved when it became clear that no armour would be made available due to other, more pressing commitments. What might have happened if General 'Strafer' Gott had lived to command the Eighth Army is an interesting question, since he was of the opinion that it should be possible to outflank the German positions moving via Siwa; a view which was discouraged by his operations officers in view of the long distances involved, under the hammer of local air superiority, in terrain which was deemed impossible for armour, let alone its necessary logistic support.

The same place just off the main market square with its bus halt. As can be seen, a tarmac road, street lighting, telephone wires and a dilapidated fuel store have now all made their appearance. Other street furniture and new buildings makes it impossible to get an exact comparison. In the event, the Italian occupation of Siwa lasted barely three months before a British force marched in having been alerted to the fact that the Italians had evacuated Siwa on November 8.

In March 1942, the Long Range Desert Group had exchanged their 1.36-tonne 1940 4 x 4 Ford F30 for 1.36-tonne 4 x 2 Chevrolet 1533X2. *Left:* **This publicity portrait from the New Zealand T Patrol was taken at Siwa by Captain E. A. Graham of the Army Film and Photographic Unit. Arthur Graham, like Captain Geoffrey Keating before him who photographed the Long Range Patrols when they were equipped with their first Chevrolet WBs, was sent to produce an exciting picture story on the LRDG. He arrived just as T, Y and S Patrols were re-equipping with their new vehicles and he later that same month accompanied the New Zealand R1 Patrol, commanded by 'Jake' Easonsmith** *(right),* **on the LRDGs 51st operation out of Siwa. Dubbed *Batl es Sahra* (the Hero of the Desert) by the Libyan Bedu, Lieutenant John Richard Easonsmith, RTR (always known as 'Jake') flew into Siwa on April 28, 1941 with the founder and commanding officer of the LRDG, Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Bagnold. On November 16, 1943, as a Lieutenant-Colonel aged 34 holding the DSO and MC, he was killed on Leros commanding the LRDG. This photograph was taken at Siwa in June 1941 by an RAF photographer on Jake's return from recovering Pilot Officer Pompeii (a downed Free French Hurricane pilot serving with 'B' Flight No. 73 Squadron, RAF) and Mohammed Tayib D'Agedabia who was being hunted by the Italians for killing their men.(IWM)**

For Siwa, only two further events marked its passage from an active theatre of war. On the night of September 13/14, 1942, the oasis was subjected to a major British 'parachute operation'; and prompted by this Feldmarschall Erwin Rommel came to visit bearing gifts of British tea! In reality the deceptionists of 'A' Force were at it again in the hope of panicking the Italians in Siwa to precipitate flight at best, to get them to waste time, effort and scarce fuel on search parties at worst, in conjunction with a series of combined land and sea raids on the logistic bases of Panzer-Armee Afrika. In the operation, code-named 'Coastguard', five Hudsons of 'Two-Sixteen' Squadron each dropped eight self-destructing miniature dummy parachutists made of hessian and straw together with flares and incendiaries in a pattern designed to attract maximum attention.

On September 13-14, Barforce, composed of the Sudan Defence Force motor battalion with support units, all from Bahariya, made a simulated advance on the oasis and then retired. Apart from the occasional alarm flare, much agitated signalling and some air reconnaissance, all these activities produced none of the hoped-for reactions. What they did produce was the poste haste despatch of the armoured cars of Aufklärungs-Abteilung 3 and the joint 8th Bersaglieri/Nizza Cavalry group arriving on the afternoon of the 17th and an inspection visit by Rommel who flew in on the morning of the 21st with his chief-of-staff Oberstleutnant i. G. Fritz Bayerlein, who had himself been round the defences the previous day.

The writer of the Panzer-Armee war diary noted he was 'enthusiastically received by the Arab population and he gave presents of 10,000 lire and tea to chiefs of Siwa'. As the result of his visit an additional Italian battalion was flown in and used to guard the approaches to Quara.

General der Panzertruppen Georg Stumme, when he in turn commanded the Panzer-Armee, also flew into Siwa at an early hour on October 16 and returned to his HQ at 1900 hours on the 22nd. The war diary is silent as to how he was received and he would, of course, shortly have much more to worry about as the guns of the Eighth Army heralded the opening of Operation 'Lightfoot' and the start of the final advance to victory.

On the afternoon of November 14, a platoon of the 1st Royal Sussex formally reoccupied Siwa, the oasis having been evacuated on the 8th watched by an LRDG patrol and the Strategic Reconnaissance Flight Baltimores. At 1900 hours on November 9, the prisoner-of-war cage set up there reported holding 1,900 prisoners and so peace came to Siwa once again. The Italian garrison of Siwa had been a reasonable one, apparently not much interested in looking for trouble and, as a parting gesture had left some of their rations behind to help out the Siwans who were by now, as in World War I and for the same reasons, on very short commons.

It is reliably reported that not long after when the Siwans held a 'fantasia' or feast to celebrate their change in circumstance (and the victory of the Eighth Army), the feasting included Rommel's gift of tea served up to the returned British Army officers!

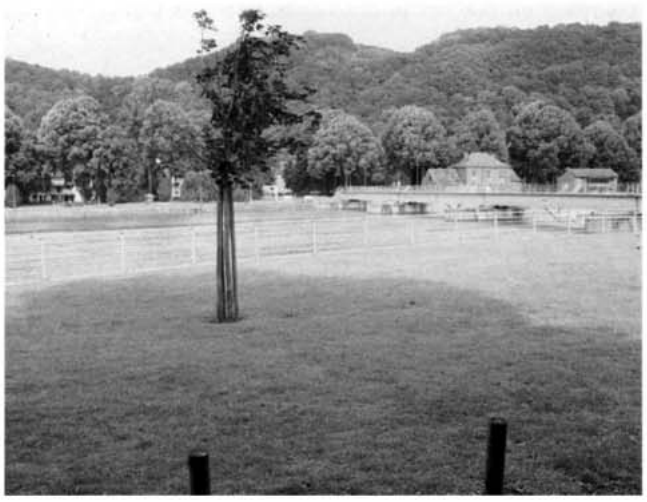
Other photographs were also taken not far from Siwa. *Left:* **This portrait in the Sand Sea shows the 0.68-tonne 4 x 2 Chevrolet 1311X3 used as a pilot car, nearest the camera, alongside two of the new 1533X2. None of the vehicles portrayed are operationally loaded and the set-ups have been done entirely for visual effect. Ralph Bagnold ordered the first LRP Chevrolets to be uniquely identified like ships with all the trucks in the same patrol taking names with the same initial letter. As the first patrols were all New Zealand manned, it was their choice to use words derived from their homeland. Since Maori words have a predominance of R, T and W words, the patrols adopted these letters. Captain Graham also shot colour cine film but, despite exhaustive enquiries, this seems to have vanished. (IWM)** *Right:* **Preparing for an extended halt in the immensity of the Egyptian Sand Sea.**

THE CAPTURE OF KURT MEYER

By Jean Paul Pallud

On September 2, 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, conferred with Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, commanding the US 12th Army Group, and Lieutenant Generals Courtney H. Hodges of the US First Army and George S. Patton of US Third Army, at Bradley's advanced headquarters at Chartres to discuss future strategy now that the battle of France was won.

Eisenhower reaffirmed that priority should go to the British 21st Army Group in the north until the much-needed port of Antwerp was captured. Patton protested and insisted that, given fuel, he could break through eastwards and quickly reach the Rhine. Bradley backed Patton and proposed that Hodges' First Army also be turned eastwards. Agreeing that a reduction of the strength of the forces driving north-eastwards was practicable in view of the reported German weakness along the Westwall, Eisenhower agreed to a compromise. First Army was still to support 21st Army Group in the north with two corps advancing in line with British Second Army but Third Army was allowed to head eastwards in the direction of Mannheim and Frankfurt. To cover the gap that was to open in consequence between the First and Third Armies, a third corps of First Army was to prepare to drive eastward through the Ardennes in the direction of Koblenz.



On September 4, 1944, the lead elements of the US 3rd Armored Division entered Namur on the Meuse in Belgium and swiftly dispersed the German forces trying to resist in the town. The construction of a pontoon bridge was started at once, but it was a time-consuming job for the river was about 150 metres wide and the first tanks were not across before the morning of the 6th. *Top:* **This picture was taken three days later by which time a second floating bridge was underway.** *Above:* **The US Signal Corps' photographer stood on the eastern bank at the end of Rue de Francquen in Jambes. (US Army)**

FIRST ARMY TO THE MEUSE

On September 3, acting along this compromise, General Hodges turned his First Army to the east. This reorientation was a complicated manoeuvre and, in view of the lack of petrol, Hodges decided to allocate the inadequate fuel supplies to his two right-hand corps which were closer to the river. He ordered the VII Corps, which was then on the army's right wing, to simply turn right and advance in the centre of the new army zone while the V Corps, then in the army's centre, was to move across the rear of the army to reach a new sector on the right. Hodges' third corps, XIX Corps, halted while waiting for supplies near Tournai, was to follow later and advance on the army's left. Plans were for the V Corps to drive on Coblenz, VII Corps toward Bonn and XIX Corps toward Cologne.

When Major General J. Lawton Collins, the VII Corps commander, received his new orders on September 3, his corps was deployed between Mons and south of Charleroi. He ordered the 9th Infantry Division, then on the corps' right flank, to turn eastwards at once and establish a bridgehead across the Meuse near Dinant.

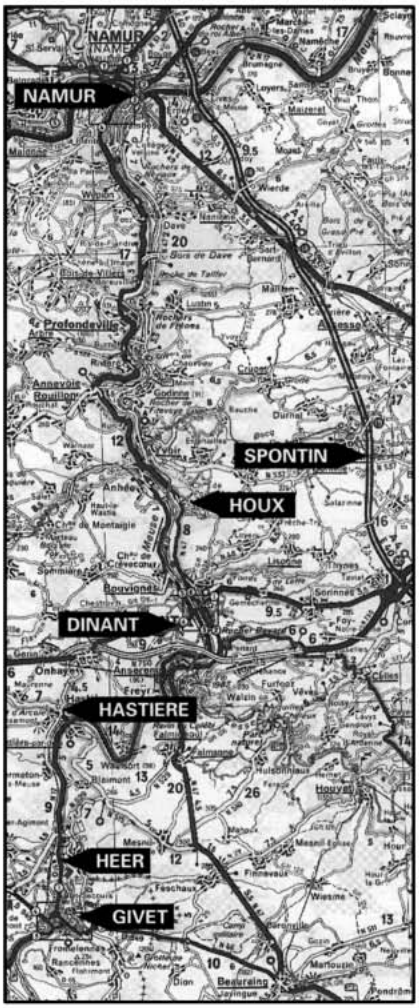
Meanwhile, following their hectic withdrawal from France, the Germans were striving to establish a semblance of a front behind the Meuse river. South of Namur, under the control of the I. SS-Panzerkorps, what remained of the 12. SS-Panzer-Division was taking up positions behind the Meuse in a sector between Godinne and Houx. On their left, in the Dinant sector, the remaining Kampfgruppe of the 2. SS-Panzer-Division was doing the same while on their right, up to Namur, were elements of the 347. Infanterie-Division. Early on September 4, the rear-guards of the 12. SS-Panzer-Division withdrew across the river at Yvoir following which the bridge was blown.

The advance elements of the 9th Infantry Division soon reached the river from Givet to Namur and discovered that the Germans were holding the eastern bank in some strength in their first real attempt to defend a water line since the Seine. The Americans managed to establish three bridgeheads north and south of Dinant, but the situation was not favourable. With good observation of the crossing sites, German artillery soon found its mark while counter-attacks were launched at the American positions. To the south, in their Heer bridgehead, the leaders of the 60th Infantry were badly mauled by elements of SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 4 of 2. SS-Panzer-Division on the morning of September 5 and the Germans took over 100 prisoners, including four officers. On the 6th, the 2. SS-Panzer-Division turned to the

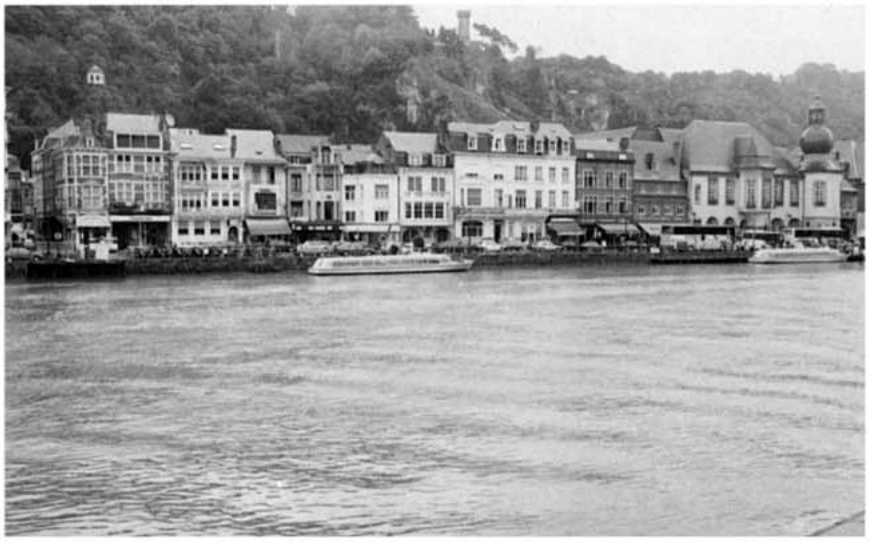
VII Corps soon crossed the Meuse in force, this convoy being pictured on Rue de Marche at Jambes. In the background, on the far bank of the Meuse (not visible), is the citadel of Namur. The markings faintly visible on these vehicles seem to identify them as belonging to Battery C of the 58th Armored Field Artillery Battalion which was then attached to the 3rd Armored. (US Army)

On September 8, many of the people of Jambes were out on the streets, cheering and shaking hands with the GIs from the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment, 3rd Armored Division, as they marched along Rue de Dave. *Above right and below:* **Standing on the left in our comparisons is Louis Warolus.**

As a young boy in 1944, M. Warolus lived throughout the fighting in nearby Spontin and his personal recollections, expert knowledge of the whole area and untiring support were of great help to Jean Paul during his research in piecing together this story.



In the first days of September, following their painful withdrawal after their defeat in Normandy, the remaining elements of I. SS-Panzerkorps were taking up positions behind the Meuse. This half-track of the 12. SS-Panzer-Division (the divisional insignia is just visible top right on the rear armour plate) was pictured at Dinant some time before it crossed the bridge that can be seen in the background. Early on September 4, the last rearguards withdrew and the Meuse bridges were blown. On the far bank of the river, one should note the block of houses that can be seen between the church and the house with a bulbous roof on the far right: we will see them again, this time in a picture taken by the Americans. *Left:* **While engineers of the 3rd Armored Division started to assemble a floating treadway bridge at Namur, further south, the leading elements of the US 9th Infantry Division were reaching the river between Namur and Givet. They found that the Germans were holding the eastern bank in some strength but the 39th Infantry Regiment managed to establish a bridgehead at Houx, just north of Dinant, while the 60th Infantry Regiment established two others some distance to the south, one at Hastière and another at Heer. The Germans reacted swiftly and soon counter-attacked. The 60th Infantry was badly mauled at Heer on the morning of September 5, the Germans taking over 100 prisoners, and on the 6th it was the turn of the Hastière bridgehead which was wiped out, with the loss of 150 men together with many vehicles and weapons. (ECPArmées)**



Above left: **At Houx, four kilometres north of Dinant, the 39th Infantry held its small bridgehead at the end of the lock against counter-attacks by elements of the 12. SS-Panzer-Division. It proved unable to expand it but on the afternoon of the 5th, the 2nd Battalion was sent across the river to reinforce the leading elements. This picture of an artillery barrage hammering the flank of the bridgehead was taken while this move was in process.** *Above right:* **The hill overlooking the Houx lock is now covered with tall trees preventing the taking of a picture from the exact spot where the American photographer once stood. This is the best comparison Karel Margry could take from lower down, on the edge of the wood. Incidentally, the Germans crossed the Meuse in the very same places in May 1940 and in *Blitzkrieg in the West, Then and Now,* Jean Paul showed them bridging the Meuse at Dinant (pages 186-187) and Houx (pages 188-189). (US Army)**

It was not before the evening of September 6, when the sudden arrival of Task Force King had broken the German defences in the Dinant sector, that the 15th Engineer Combat Battalion was able to start the construction of a pontoon bridge for the 9th Division at Dinant. In this picture taken on September 7, we can see the same houses on the river bank, between the church (just out of the picture to the left) and the house with a bulbous roof in the German photo. (US Army)

At Namur, the first tanks of the 3rd Armored Division crossed the Meuse on the morning of September 6 but most of the division had to wait behind for fuel supplies to arrive. Following an order from General J. Lawton Collins, the VII Corps commander, Task Force King started out south-eastward later that morning in order to rescue those elements of the 9th Division tied up in their bridgehead at Houx. By early afternoon, the leading elements had reached Spontin and these pictures were taken showing them entering the village from the north-east along the Chaussée de Dinant. An inscription chalked on the front of this half-track by a Belgian, probably when the task force was assembling at Namur, reads: 'Rex est crevé' ('Rex is dead'), Rex being the name of a Belgian collaborationist movement. (via J. L. Roba)

Hastière bridgehead and it too was wiped out, over 150 men being lost with a large number of vehicles and weapons being captured. At Houx, north of Dinant, the 39th Infantry succeeded in holding its bridgehead against renewed counter-attacks by the 12. SS-Panzer-Division, but it proved unable to expand it, let alone to construct a pontoon birdge for armour and supply vehicles.

Meanwhile, having waited at Mons for fuel supplies, the 3rd Armored Division had started eastwards for Namur on September 4. Reaching the town, infantry crossed the Meuse on a damaged bridge and dispersed the weak German forces trying to resist. The construction of a floating treadway bridge was started at Namur-Jambes, a difficult job for the river was about 150 metres wide, and the first tanks were not across before the morning of the 6th. Most of the 3rd Armored Division was again halted that day, to wait for more fuel, but Collins ordered that an armoured task force be sent south to help the 9th Division still tied up near Dinant.

Under Lieutenant Colonel Rosewell H. King, commanding the 1st Battalion of the 33rd Armored Regiment, Task Force King started out later that morning, moving south-eastward along the main road to Marche. Beyond Assesse, it turned left in the direction of Dinant and by midday the leading elements had reached Miannoye and then moved on to Spontin. Brushing aside weak resistance by a few surprised Germans, the task force pressed forward and in the evening of September 6 had reached Dinant and broken through the German defences. Little did the Americans know that the German force they had brushed aside at Spontin was in fact the tactical headquarters of the 12. SS-Panzer-Division and that they had narrowly missed a golden opportunity of capturing the divisional commander.

SURPRISE AT SPONTIN

Earlier that morning, unaware that the American armour had reached Namur, far on its right, and encouraged by the successes reached on the previous morning south of Dinant, the 12. SS-Panzer-Division was trying to co-ordinate its effort with the 2. SS-Panzer-Division to wipe out the small American bridgehead across the Meuse at Houx. The division commander, SS-Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer, was at the front, visiting the II. Abteilung of his SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 26 which held the right wing of the division sector.

About midday on September 6, at Durnal, a despatch rider stopped in front of the house at which the division command post had been set up. Breathless, he reported that

This corner of Spontin has changed little in over 50 years. The railway station is still there, in the left background, but the long wall that used to surround the château, just off the picture on the left, has been razed to the ground. When Karel Margry went to Spontin to take new comparisons, he found that a circus had parked in front of the château. He took this nice 'two-comparisons-in-one shot' but reported being 'sorry about the circus vans'.

a patrol moving along the Namur-Marche main road had bumped into an enemy armoured column near Assesse, about five kilometres north of Durnal. The Americans were advancing in the direction of Marche! This alarming report was soon confirmed by another despatch rider sent from Miannoye, just four kilometres to the east, by the division's recce battalion: one of their few remaining armoured cars had just been disabled near the village by Sherman tanks, of which over 25 had been observed. The fact that the American armour had reached Miannoye meant that their task force had left the main road to Marche and turned right. They now advanced westwards, probably intending to link up with the two beleaguered American bridgeheads.

When Kurt Meyer returned to his command post and heard of the two reports, he immediately ordered all of the division's units, and particularly those holding the Americans in their bridgehead near Houx, to withdraw eastwards to the line Emptinne-Pessoux. While these orders were hurriedly despatched to the front units, the headquarters personnel packed up their equipment in the few vehicles remaining, and left. Their midday meal remained unfinished on the tables.

The five vehicles or so of the HQ convoy sped southwards in the direction of Spontin. Joining the east-west Ciney to Yvoir road, two options were open to them: either to turn left and move eastwards to Ciney and Marche, or to turn right, westwards, and join up with the troops withdrawing from the Houx bridgehead. Several officers, among them the division's Ia (first staff officer), SS-Sturmbannführer Hubert Meyer, said they believed that the second option was preferable in view of the supposed position of the American task force, but the division commander disagreed and the small convoy resumed its drive and entered Spontin. The time was about 2 p.m.

The first vehicle had just passed the town centre when it bumped into the lead elements of Task Force King. A canon shot echoed in the valley, the shell exploding against a wall. The leading German car sped away, but those behind stopped and the occupants ran for cover. However, the doors giving access to the houses were all locked from the inside and the Germans found themselves trapped in the street. A cloud of dust drifting across the road gave cover for a while but more shots followed, some vehicles were destroyed and a dozen men were killed. After this short engagement, the Americans continued in the direction of Dinant, unaware that they had shot up an enemy divisional headquarters. Meanwhile, those Germans who had managed to escape assembled in a wood just west of the village which provided some cover. A roll call was held and they found that the division commander was missing, together with his ordnance officer and his driver. SS-Sturmbannführer Hubert Meyer immediately returned to Spontin with his driver, SS-Unterscharführer Helmut Schmieding, to carry out a search.

In the village, which they found abandoned, they called out the division commander's name but there was no reply. Then they heard the noise of engines and the rattle of tank tracks becoming louder and soon they saw more American tanks entering the village. Shortly, what seemed like the entire population was down in the streets, cheering and shouting. Hoping that Kurt Meyer and the other missing men had succeeded in escaping on their own, Hubert Meyer and his driver filtered back to the shelter of the wood. The group of Germans remained hidden there through the evening, waiting for the night. Starting at midnight, they withdrew eastwards, without further troubles, and soon joined up with friendly troops some distance south of Ciney.

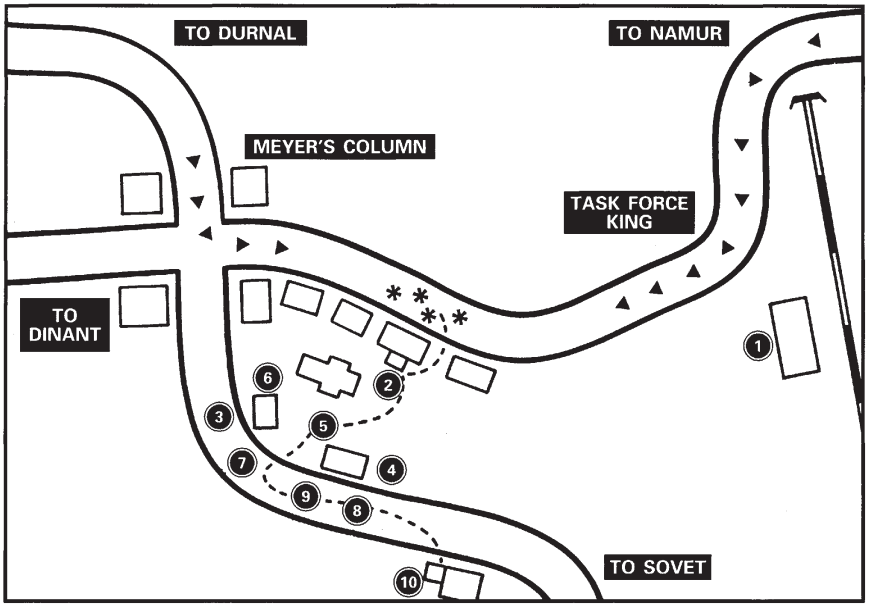
Task Force King comprised the 1st Battalion, 33rd Armored Regiment; Company F of the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment; the 3rd Platoon of the Reconnaissance Company, 33rd Armored Regiment; the 2nd Platoon of Company B, 23rd Armored Engineer Battalion and some miscellaneous elements. It was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rosewell H. King of the 1st Battalion, 33rd Armored Regiment. This Jeep pictured in front of the château wall in Spontin would seem to be the leading vehicle of Company F, 36th Armored Infantry. (via J. L. Roba)

THE CAPTURE OF KURT MEYER

Contrary to what his comrades had hoped, Kurt Meyer was still trapped in the village. When the leading American tanks had fired at the convoy and stopped it, he had jumped over a fence, only to find himself trapped in an enclosed area, with the Americans firing at him from one side and a wall on the other. Reasoning that if he tried to climb over the wall, he would certainly came under fire, he chose to hide into a nearby chicken-house. His driver, SS-Unterscharführer Max Bornhöft, soon joined him. 'There were now two of us in this trap!', Meyer later wrote in his book *Grenadiere.*

Elated by the arrival of the American tanks, the local partisans of Spontin, and probably many other locals too, started a search for the fleeing Germans. However, it is difficult to determine whether these parties actually caught any of the Germans and, as has been claimed elsewhere, shot some of them. Meyer later said that SS-Obersturmführer Heinz Kölln had been killed by civilians but it is also possible that Kölln was killed in the initial brief encouter with the American tankers.

Trapped in the outhouse, scared off by the shouts and cheers, Meyer and his comrade decided to wait for the night, hoping to



This sketch plan of Spontin (not to scale) illustrates how SS-Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer's HQ column arriving from the north-west bumped into Task Force King arriving from the north-east and it shows Meyer's own escape route. [1] the railway station. [2] M. Tasiaux's hen-house where Meyer and Bornhöft first took refuge. [3] Gendarmerie. [4] M. Enuzet's house. Gunfight at the cemetery, between Meyer and Bornhöft [5] and the Gendarmes Tilmant and Demazy [6]. Gunfight on Rue du Bouchat, between Gerson [7] and Meyer [8]. Bornhöft fell wounded in the middle of the street [9]. [10] The pig-sty where Meyer ended his war career.

escape under the cover of darkness. It started to rain, which they welcomed at first for they believed that it would keep people inside and thus make escape easier. However, as Meyer recounted in his book, because of the rain, the hens gathered in front of the outhouse, wanting to take shelter inside as usual. However, they were not ready to share their coop with strangers and they remained cackling outside. M. Calixte Tasiaux could not understand the reluctance of his hens to enter their house so he popped his head inside. 'Before he could say a word', wrote Meyer, 'he found himself in a dark corner, sat on an old barrel. He looked at my pistol with distress. However, certain that his wife would soon come to look for him, we decided to let the old man go, but only after he had promised not to contact the partisans'.

It was now about 6.30 p.m. Feeling that the farmer would probably break his promise, the two Germans decided to leave immediately. They climbed over a side wall and started to make their way across the village but they had not covered 50 metres before a neighbour, M. Jean-Baptiste Enuzet, saw them crossing his back garden. He quickly ran across to the Gendarmerie which was only a few yards away and reported that two Germans were escaping in the direction of the church.

The two gendarmes on duty, Gendarmes Demazy and Tilmant, immediately went to investigate. Turning the corner in the direction of the church, they saw the two Germans climbing the wall into the cemetery. Demazy challenged them and some shots were exchanged with the Germans who were hiding behind gravestones.

Alerted by the firing, some locals soon arrived at the church. Among them were Marcel Bertholet and Alphonse Gerson; the latter armed with a rifle he had liberated that very morning from a German deserter who had surrendered at the Gendarmerie.

After a while, the two Germans broke cover and jumped over the wall which separated the cemetery from a garden near the Gendarmerie, ran across the garden, and out on the Rue du Bouchat.

Meyer: 'We came across a partisan armed with a rifle [M. Gerson?] and he ran away when I threatened him with my pistol. They had sounded the alarm, we were trapped. I climbed over a wall and jumped down in the street, four metres below. Max followed, gasping for breath. The street was steep, I felt like my lungs were about to burst.'

Gerson: 'I reached the street via a short cut and I saw one of the Germans about 30 metres away. I took aim and fired.'

Having brushed aside the small German convoy, this Sherman halted in the middle of the main crossroads in the centre of Spontin. On its side armour, beside the tank's name 'Freedom's Force', a Belgian hand has chalked 'Jambes', the place where the task force had reached the eastern bank of the Meuse. In this view looking north, we can see the end of the Rue des Rivières, the street down which Meyer's convoy arrived before it turned left to bump into the lead elements of Task Force King. Hit as he was about to turn the corner, a dead German motorcyclist can be seen burning on his motorcycle. (Via J. L. Roba)

Task Force King soon carried on in the direction of Dinant, completely unaware that they had shot up an important German divisional headquarters. This half-track was pictured on the Chaussée de Dinant, rolling westwards, while the population was cheering and shouting as the task force passed. The marking visible on the mudguard identifies it as part of the 1st Battalion, 33rd Armored Regiment, 3rd Armored Division.

That evening, Task Force King reached the Dinant sector and broke the German defences holding elements of the 9th Infantry Division in the Houx bridgehead. It is interesting to note that at the moment when this picture was taken, Meyer and Bornhöft were most probably still hiding in the chicken coop, a few hundred metres behind the houses in the background. (via J. L. Roba)

Left: **The fateful crossroads in Spontin where the Germans took the wrong turning in 1944 as it appeared in July 1997. This is the view Kurt Meyer would have had of the end of Rue des Rivières when his convoy was about to reach the Chaussée de Dinant running east-west. He could have decided to turn right, westwards, and join up with his troops falling back from the Meuse front, but instead he chose to turn left and start eastwards to Ciney. It was about 2 p.m. when the few vehicles of the convoy made their ill-fated move.** *Right:* **This is how the Chaussée de Dinant would have appeared to the Americans with the German convoy coming towards the camera and leading elements of Task Force King advancing towards it. When the Americans opened fire, the Germans stopped and ran for cover. Surprised more or less in front of M. Tasiaux's house (left centre of this picture), Meyer jumped over the fence and found himself trapped behind the house.**

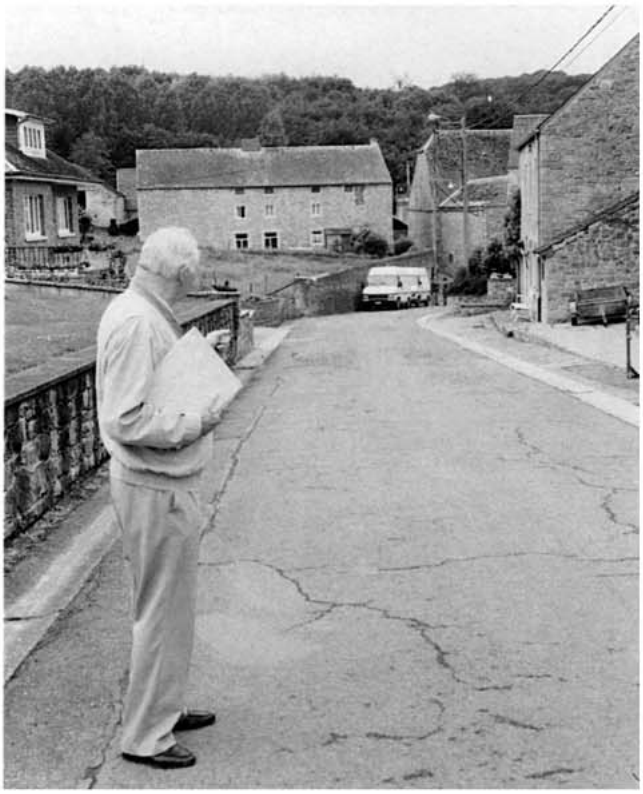
'Bullets whistled close by,' wrote Meyer. 'Still running, I heard Max shout. I turned around and fired some shots down the street. I saw Max lying on the pavement, he had been hit. I reached the end of the village and I saw two partisans barring the way. Where to go? Near by, I saw a small door just closed by a stone. Without being seen, I succeeded to hide inside. I was exhausted.'

The chief of the Spontin police brigade, Gendarme François Demlenne, then reached the spot. He was off duty this day and he came as he was, dressed in civilian clothes. Taking over the operation, he quickly organised a search party. Some ten Belgians, a mixture of gendarmes and civilians, started to inspect houses and back gardens. Through a slit between two planks, Meyer watched their activities 'running back and fro, searching every bush. They could not understand how I could have disappeared and were reproaching one another.'

Just then, one of the Belgians noticed that the door of the pigsty by the side of the Rue du Bouchat was closed. Usually, it was left open so Demlenne took up position a few yards in front of the door, and deployed his troop around him. Gendarme Tilmant was there, as were Fernand Paye, Georges Hubot, Marcel Bertholet, Alphonse Gerson and Demlenne's younger son, Max. From inside, Meyer observed them: 'I could see their faces. Some had a tense and hard look,

While a noisy fire-fight took place on the street, Meyer took shelter in this chicken house that still stands just behind the house. Max Bornhöft, his driver, soon joined him. Shouts and cheers of the joyful population echoed all over the village so the two Germans decided to stay hidden until nightfall. However, when they were discovered by M. Tasiaux at about 6.30 p.m., they had no alternative but to try to escape from the village.

Another villager, M. Enuzet, soon saw them climbing over a wall and he ran to the Gendarmerie to report the two Germans hiding behind the church. Two gendarmes were immediately sent to investigate. *Left:* **This is the view from the corner of the Gendarmerie (just off the right forefront of the picture) looking towards the church and adjoining cemetery which has now completely disappeared, including the walls which surrounded it. Seeing the two Germans climbing over the wall that used to stand in the right background, and jumping down into the cemetery, the Gendarmes challenged them and some shots were exchanged.** *Right*: **This picture is taken from the German's viewpoint as they returned fire from behind the gravestones. The Gendarmerie is visible on the left with the church on the right. After a while, the two Germans jumped over the wall on the far left, to run across the garden behind the Gendarmerie to reach the Rue du Bouchat.**



Running up the Rue du Bouchat with Bornhöft following, Meyer gasped for breath: 'I felt like my lungs were about to burst.' Meanwhile, Gerson had reached the same street and he fired at the fleeing Germans from a distance of about 30 metres *(left).* **'Bullets whistled close by', wrote Meyer. Turning around to return fire, he saw his comrade lying wounded in the middle of the street.** *Right:* **M. Warolus plays a somewhat relaxed Meyer firing back at Gerson.**

others looked like harmless citizens to whom somebody had just given a rifle.' He noted a young boy, about 14. Armed with a rifle, he stood close to the 'leader of the group' (Demlenne) and Meyer guessed that they were father and son.

Demlenne challenged the supposed occupant of the pigsty in German, ordering him to come out but there was no answer.

Meyer: 'Following terrible experiences on the Eastern Front, I had once sworn to myself never to be taken alive. Now, the time had come! I have one bullet in the breech and another in the magazine. Must I abide to my oath? Is it relevant here? Things are quite different from the Eastern Front! I think of my family and my child that was about to be born. It was awfully difficult to take such a decision.'

Demlenne then told Gerson to fire through the door, which he did, but still there was no reaction from inside. In German, Demlenne then shouted that grenades were about to be thrown into the pigsty — an empty threat for they did not have grenades. Nevertheless, the threat achieved its purpose for a voice replied from the inside: 'Ich bin da!' — 'I am here!'

In German, Demlenne shouted back: 'Throw down your weapon, walk out, hands up!' The door opened and a tall man came out with the Ritterkreuz around his neck. He stood up, clicked his heels, and said 'Ich bin ein General!'

'You are a prisoner of war', answered Demlenne, at which the German reportedly asked whether he promised not to kill him.

'Yes, on my honour', said Demlenne.

'Are you an officer?' asked Meyer.

'No!'

'So, who are you?'

'You'll know in time, when we turn you over to the Americans!'

This exchange, which could almost have been written for a screenplay, comes from the Belgian recollections. In his own account, Kurt Meyer merely described a few tense minutes, with pistols and rifles aggressively pointed at him, and how the leader of the group [Demlenne] ordered his comrades to restrain themselves from killing him.

Still running along the Rue du Bouchat, Meyer saw another group of partisans in the distance. Exhausted, he decided to hide in the small pigsty that used to flank M. Libert's house. *Left:* **The pigsty disappeared long ago but M. Warolus points out where it once stood. Once captured, Meyer and the wounded Bornhöft were taken down to the basement of the church.** *Right:* **This is the cellar at the rear of the church as it appears today.**

Sic transit Gloria. *Left:* **In October 1941, Kurt Meyer was featured on the front cover of several German newspapers like this Cologne illustrated magazine. 'Forwards!' he shouted during street fighting in Mariupol on the Eastern Front. 'Rifle in hand, the Ritterkreuz holder SS-Sturmbannführer Kurt Meyer is at the front with his men.'** *Right:* **We do not know precisely when this picture was taken but it was probably in the summer of 1945 when Meyer was in a PoW camp in England. The fact that he is still dressed in the uniform of a German Army colonel is in keeping with his capture at Spontin. (US Army)**

Meyer was taken to the Gendarmerie, together with his wounded comrade (who had been badly wounded in the thigh and all this time had been lying in the street). There, Bornhöft was attended to by the local doctor, M. Louis Kaux, who, according to Meyer, was quite friendly. The gendarmes on the other hand were not and, again according to Meyer, when they secured them with handcuffs, they deliberately put these on as tight as possible causing terrible pain. Meyer also says that the Belgians laughed at their suffering although the Belgian witnesses make no mention of handcuffs which can be interpreted in two ways: either it did not happen, or the Belgians felt it was better to keep quiet about this part of the story.

The two prisoners were then taken down to the basement of the church, only a few yards from the Gendarmerie. Its small windows were closed on the outside by a pile of old gravestones. As a precaution, Demlenne ordered the arrest of one particular civilian, known for talking too liberally. He was also put in the church basement, together with the German deserter, an Alsacian, who had been hiding in the village since earlier that morning.

The gendarmes took turns to guard the prisoners, and Demlenne took the opportunity to talk with Meyer. He told him that German soldiers had just burned down several houses in Sovet, a village four kilometres to the south, and shot a number of civilians, and Demlenne informed Meyer that these soldiers were probably from his unit. Meyer agreed that they might well have been his men but they had probably reacted because partisans had fired first.

In the evening, another German soldier who had surrendered to the partisans was brought to the church basement, making a total of five prisoners. It appears that Meyer mistakenly believed that both the Belgian civilian and the Alsacian deserter were partisans, and one can imagine both men, and particularly the deserter, wanting to segregate themselves in a corner of the basement, away from the dreaded SS soldiers.

Meanwhile, the Americans had departed in the direction of Dinant and pratically disappeared from the sector. The Germans hastily rebuilt a defensive line some distance to the east of Spontin as originally ordered by Meyer. In the village, joy at being liberated had now given way to a strange silence. The people soon returned to their houses, all the more quickly when small groups of Germans began passing through. However, these troops were retreating apparently with no knowledge of Meyer's disappearence and the village was soon as silent and deserted as it had been before the arrival of the Americans. The night was uneventful.

As soon as he had made contact with those elements of the division which had withdrawn in the afternoon, SS-Sturmbannführer Hubert Meyer had sent out a patrol of two light scout cars to Spontin to search for the missing division commander. As they approached Spontin in the early hours of September 7, the two light cars were fired at and the patrol was forced to turn back. Later in the day, a two-man patrol reached the village where they had been guided by a Belgian, a man from Ghent, who worked at the mineral water factory in Spontin. It seems that they advanced as far as the Gendarmerie, questioning several civilians on their way. They returned, saying that they had been told that an officer had been killed in the village while two other men, one of them with a decoration around his neck, had been taken away by the Americans.

On the morning of September 7, as the battle approached Spontin for the second time, many of the inhabitants decided that it was wiser to seek shelter some distance away while the Americans and the Germans fought it out. The gendarmes left and Demlenne went to the church to order the three guarding the prisoners to follow him. Surprisingly, the Germans did not try to escape; apparently, they were under the impression that they were still being guarded by the German deserter whom they thought was an armed partisan.

The Belgians took cover in a nearby wood where they soon came under machine-gun fire although no one was hit. About midday, after a brief firefight, American tanks rolled into Spontin. Infantry followed and soon reached the church. They found the prisoners in their makeshift prison and Meyer, his wounded driver Bornhöft, together with the deserter and the dispirited soldier were removed.

The church and the cemetery were still under fire from German machine guns from a wood about 150 metres away and the GIs and their prisoners took cover between the graves, waiting for a let-up. 'Before I really knew what was happening, my watch and rings and money was stolen from me behind the church.' Meyer was then taken away by another GI who prodded him across the village, hitting him repeatedly with the butt of his rifle. He was soon covered in blood and some women standing in front of their house protested at the rough treatment of the German. However, the American kept beating his prisoner, pushing him into a garden, preparing to shoot him. He was just levelling his rifle at Meyer when a young lieutenant arrived and stopped the execution in the nick of time.

The lieutenant placed Meyer on the front mudguard of his vehicle 'so as not to stain the inside but in a few moments the windscreen was red with my blood', recalled Meyer. Some time later, he was handed over to a supply column to be taken to Namur with about 60 other prisoners. The column stopped in front of the prison where an excited mob immediately surrounded the group and 'without warning and in a fraction of a second' the wounded Bornhoft was shot dead. The Americans 'chased away the juvenile street louts' and the convoy moved off again to halt in the yard of the Gendarmerie.

At the time, the place was under the control of local partisans ('adolescents displaying their red scarves like important decorations', noted Meyer) and the prisoners were immediately lined up in the yard, a hail of blows from rifle butts hastening the operation. Meyer noted that 'an American talked insistently to the partisans while pointing to me' and he was soon removed from the line-up and his wounds bandaged. He saw several partisans beating prisoners and was told that they were 'sorting out the Waffen-SS and paratroopers to kill them'. Soon shots echoed across the yard and, according to Meyer, about 20 Germans were thus murdered.

Obviously, the Americans had decided to spare Meyer from the wrath of the partisans, telling them that he was a colonel from the 2. Panzer-Division. Explaining that he had a fractured skull (which was not true), they hoodwinked the partisans into having him taken to hospital.

Following a further scare when other partisans eyed him with interest because 'my camouflage jacket seems to be known to them as it identified me as a member of the Waffen-SS', Meyer flushed his paybook down the toilet. His blood-soaked jacket was then taken from him and some partisans went through his pockets, looking for his papers. Finding nothing, they asked for his paybook and his answer of 'Americans', seemed to satisfy them. It seems that at that stage he was given the uniform of a colonel in the German Army.

Meyer remained in the hospital for two weeks being 'excellently treated by the doctors'. He was moved to Rheims at the beginning of October, then to a PoW camp near Compiègne. However, once his true identity was revealed, he was straightaway taken to an airfield near Paris and flown to Britain.

He was at first caged in the 'Enfield' camp (most probably Cockfosters) then moved to Windermere. In June 1945, he was transferred to No. 18 Camp near Featherstone, Yorkshire, where he learned that the Canadians wanted to bring him before a military court for his alleged rôle in the execution of seven Canadian prisoners in the Ardennes Abbey, in Normandy, in June 1944 (see *D-Day Then and Now,* pages 500-501). In November 1945, Meyer was flown to Aurich, Germany, for his trial and on December 28, was found guilty and condemned to death. He was due to be hanged at the beginning of January but the sentence was reviewed and subsequently commuted to life imprisonment.

In April 1946, he was transported to Canada to serve his sentence where he remained in jail until October 1951 when he was moved to the British prison at Werl, Germany. He was finally released on September 7, 1954, his liberation being greeted by hundreds of Waffen-SS veterans. He wrote a book *Grenadiere* relating his war experiences, and then dedicated the rest of his life to obtaining the same rights for veterans of the Waffen-SS as were accorded to members of the other branches of the German armed forces.

Meyer's health deteriorated as a result of his war wounds and tireless efforts on behalf of his chosen cause and he suffered a fatal heart attack on December 23, 1961, in Hagen, Westphalia, while celebrating his 51st birthday.

Meyer was handed over to a supply column together with about 60 prisoners and taken to Namur. There, the convoy drew up in front of the prison on Boulevard du Nord, whereupon an excited mob of civilians immediately surrounded the prisoners. The wounded Bornhöft was promptly shot dead, the spot where he was killed being pictured for us by Jean Louis Roba in the summer of 1997. The Americans then took their prisoners to the yard of the Gendarmerie on Rue de l'Arsenal *(bottom left),* **supposedly safer for it was controlled by partisans.**

Left: **The prisoners were lined in the yard under a hail of blows from rifle butts, and, according to Meyer, any Waffen-SS and paratroopers were separated ready for execution. He says he saw about 20 Germans shot here on September 7, 1944. In his own account, Meyer refers to the 'police station yard' but Jean Louis confirmed that this was actually the Gendarmerie near Saint-Aubin church which Meyer calls an 'old Gothic church'. There is no memorial to commemorate the killing of the German prisoners at Namur or the capture of Meyer at Spontin, but at Sovet this monument** *(right)* **commemorates the death of 15 civilians shot by Meyer's men in September 1944. On September 4, near the Salazine farm between Spontin and Sovet, some partisans fired at a group of soldiers, two of them being wounded. Troops, quite probably from the 12. SS-Panzer-Division, then arrived and promptly shot 15 civilians, among them two women, and burnt about 20 houses in reprisal.**

SHELL